

A Scots Émigré, Imperial Systems and Global Commodities: Gillian Maclaine and his Mercantile Network, 1816–1840

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A Scots Émigré, Imperial Systems and Global Commodities: Gillian Maclaine and his Mercantile Network, 1816–1840¹

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Gillian Maclaine light-heartedly styled himself early in his career in the East as a ‘Scotch Adventurer’. Yet this was too modest a designation for an individual who went on to found a major and enduring mercantile business in colonial Indonesia and who, when he first arrived on the island of Java at the beginning of the 1820s, was both well educated and had several years of commercial experience behind him in the UK. Like many of his European counterparts, his career located him in the realms of Western empire building in nineteenth century Asia. More specifically, like so many of his British contemporaries, his own personal trajectory was framed within the context of the on-going history of the British East India Company (EIC) that formed a ubiquitous presence in the world in which Maclaine operated. Even so, his location there was distinctive – though hardly unique – in so far as his activities as both merchant and planter straddled two very different empires: the British one from which he heralded; and the Dutch one in the Netherlands Indies where he worked and settled. The imperial context in which he was enmeshed, however, was integrated with a global one that partly subsumed it.

For Maclaine was not only positioned, at times somewhat awkwardly, along one of the nineteenth century’s (lesser) imperial fault lines. At least as crucially, he was positioned along commodity chains that extended between the Americas, Europe and the heartlands of Asia; and whose key dynamics, though far from independent of ‘empire’, nonetheless exhibited a substantial degree of autonomy from it. At the same time, however, Maclaine’s engagement in commodity chains is easily misunderstood. Particularly so, indeed, if those chains are viewed (predominantly or exclusively) in terms of a ‘World System’ that subordinated a (colonial) ‘periphery’ of raw material production to a (metropolitan) manufacturing ‘core’.

In fact, Maclaine’s activity on the colonial ‘periphery’ of empire complicates significantly any notion that he was thereby subservient to, or simply the agent of, metropolitan ‘core’ interests in whatever form. His career in the Indies certainly started that way. Nevertheless, it continued and ended with a slewing-off of bilateral ties with his erstwhile metropole, and the establishment of a successful – and long-enduring – colonial business network solidly based in Asia and dependent (albeit to varying degrees over time) on intra-Asian trade. Maclaine’s story raises questions about the explanatory value of ‘World Systems’ in general, suggesting that they fail to allow for the sheer diversity of global patterns of production and distribution – and for the power of agency on the periphery. In this latter context, moreover, the history of Maclaine Watson – both during its founder’s lifetime and subsequently – relates to a broad and on-going debate about the global importance of *inter-Asian* trade per se, as distinct from bilateral, intercontinental trade between a Western ‘core’ and Oriental ‘peripheries’.

¹ This paper is adapted from the opening chapter of the author’s forthcoming *Trade and Empire in Early Nineteenth Century Southeast Asia. Gillian Maclaine and his Business Network*, Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer, 2015.

The paper begins with a short outline of the life of Gillian Maclaine (1798-1840) and of the history of the firm of Maclaine Watson that he co-founded in Batavia (present day Jakarta), seven years after his arrival there in 1820. It continues by explaining something of the global setting before elaborating the specific imperial context of Maclaine's career, drawing attention in particular to the world of the East India Company in which he found himself in both London and Asia, and its juxtaposition with the Dutch colonial enterprise in the Indies. The paper then moves to a discussion of aspects of the nexus between imperial history and the evolution of global commodity chains. Firstly, it deals with the three such chains – cotton goods, coffee and opium – that together constituted the basis for Maclaine's activities as both merchant and planter. Secondly, it considers the importance of the case history of the foundation of Maclaine Watson for our understanding of World Systems Analysis, and then proceeds to the related issue of the firm's place in a global re-organisation of trade that took place during the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. Thirdly, it throws a spotlight on the extent to which the network of firms – held together by ties of Highland consanguinity – that constituted 'Maclaine Watson' came to be located in inter-Asian commerce rather than in its bi-lateral colonial-metropolitan counterpart. This, in turn, is a theme that is reiterated and expanded in the paper's conclusion.

Gillian Maclaine: Life and Times

Gillian Maclaine was born on the island of Mull, off the West Coast of Scotland, in 1798. At the age of twelve, he was sent to the grammar school at Oban, the main urban centre and chief port of the Western Highlands, and from there went on to the University of Glasgow. This was followed by an informal apprenticeship in business in an East India commercial House in London. By the age of twenty-two, however, Maclaine found himself across the other side of the world, on the island of Java, the 'garden of the East' and the key Dutch possession in the erstwhile Netherlands Indies. A precocious start as both a merchant and planter culminated in 1827 in the foundation of a business partnership under the name of 'Maclaine Watson' in the colonial capital of Batavia. Initially, at the very start of their history Maclaine Watson dealt primarily in cotton goods and coffee (though this was soon to change). Cotton goods were imported from the UK and sold locally, whereas coffee was grown in Java itself for sale in various destinations in the West. Notionally, there was a nice symbiosis between two commodities that paid for each other. In fact, matters developed very differently, and serious commercial difficulties, together with Maclaine's ill-health, almost brought the fledgling business to grief at the end of the 1820s, but eighteen months spent (mostly) in the UK restored both his constitution and his fortunes.

Returning to Java in 1832, Maclaine had the perspicacity and romantic good fortune to marry a young woman whom he had met on board ship from Rotterdam. Her family was quite exceptionally well connected in official circles in Java: a point of some significance because the Dutch colony was in thrall to an officialdom that had inherited some of the prejudice against 'private' business of its monopolistic Dutch predecessor. A good marriage helped in rebuilding Maclaine's commercial fortunes, but so too did an infusion of capital into the firm from a wealthy fellow Scot. Likewise of importance was a substantial but short-lived revival of the trade in cotton goods from the UK.

Most significant of all, however, was a major diversification of the firm's operations, that left it far less dependent on bilateral commercial relations with Europe than had previously been the case, and the formation of an embryonic mercantile network that extended both to other major ports in the Indies and northward to Singapore. In tandem, Maclaine succeeded in gathering around himself a number of very capable business partners –

many of them fellow Scots – and became increasingly adept at navigating the considerable commercial hazards attendant on doing business in the East.

The upshot of these several developments was that Maclaine Watson prospered, as it had not done earlier. So much so, indeed, that in 1840 Maclaine and his immediate family set sail for Scotland, since he was now in a strong enough financial position to set up as a landed proprietor in the Highlands, something that had been his ambition since his departure for London some two and a half decades earlier. But it was not to be: somewhere in the Indian Ocean, probably not so very far from Mauritius, his ship went down in a storm, and all aboard perished.

Maclaine Watson, however, did not perish with its founder. On the contrary, it demonstrated a remarkable longevity. The firm's connection with Gillian Maclaine's own family in the Highlands had been severed by the end of the 1840s. So too had any connection with Edward Watson, Gillian Maclaine's chief business partner in Batavia. Nonetheless, the enterprise continued as a family firm, though now as one run by a coterie of Highland families – and their English and Dutch collaborators – whose links with Maclaine Watson dated back to the 1820s but who were not the founder's kith and kin. These families stayed at the helm of Maclaine Watson for the next hundred years, and ensured that the firm remained true to its original moorings in the East: although the firm opened a London office in the 1880s, its headquarters remained firmly located in Batavia. Over the course of time, the enterprise there transformed itself into one of Java's biggest sugar-exporting firms – though as Java sugar began to fade from the world market during the 1930s, diversification into other commodities kept it in business. It remained in business, with an interlude during the Second World War, until 1964, when its operations in the archipelago were nationalised by the Indonesian Government. Elsewhere, the company's record finally petered out late in the twentieth century. The commercial enterprise that Gillian Maclaine had begun more than one hundred and forty years earlier had proved, in short, to be one of quite remarkable longevity. Indeed, very few of the European mercantile firms operating in 'the Indies' in the late colonial era could lay claim to a similar record.

A World 'Compact and Connected'

Gillian Maclaine was a tiny cog in a vast machine that reflected an astonishing degree and scale of maritime interconnectedness. That degree and scale was, of course, a phenomenon that had deep historical roots. As has been expounded by Linda Colley, for instance, the mid-eighteenth century in particular witnessed one of those "global moments" in which a "sense that the world was becoming visibly more compact and connected was pronounced", and in which the sea, in particular, far from being a distancing factor, became "the prime vehicle and emblem of connectivity."²

Even so, during the first half of the nineteenth century, fuelled above all by the power of steam, the evolution of this 'connectivity', both on land and sea, remains remarkable. In 1816 he first reached London from Scotland by sail: fifteen years later (as he proudly informed his uncle) he accomplished the journey from the Highlands to the southern metropolis in a mere sixty-four hours, taking steamers from the Highlands to Glasgow and thence onward to Liverpool. From there he made his way by the newly opened railway (the

² Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*, London: Harper Collins, 2007, pp. xxiv-xxv.

first of its kind in the world) to Manchester. He was then forced back to the stagecoach – but in another seven years (in 1838) could have reached his final destination by train, via a rail network that linked the industrial northwest to Birmingham and thence on to London.³

Connectedness, moreover, was by no means confined to Western Europe. Maclaine's two voyages to Java took place by sail on a route around Africa that took between three and four months to complete. Had he lived another five or six years, he could have made the journey by steamer in a matter of five or six weeks via the Egyptian land bridge and the so-called 'Overland route'.⁴ Indeed, this is precisely what his brother Angus Maclaine did in 1846, en route to his sheep farm in Australia, but calling on the way at Batavia to finalise the transfer of the fortune to which he had become heir.

Transit of goods followed similar patterns, with the important exception that it was not until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 that cargoes began to catch up with passengers on the Middle Eastern route between Europe and Asia. Until then, there could be no question of anything but the smallest parcels of the most valuable goods accompanying people. Nonetheless, as its full title implies, the Overland *Mail* route did mean a radical speeding up of commercial information, decades before the arrival of the telegraph at the end of the 1860s. While Maclaine was still alive, his letters to the people with whom he did business in London and Glasgow would have taken an average of three and half months to arrive – and even their 'posting' in Java had to be carefully synchronised with the irregular sailing of cargo boats to London, Rotterdam or Amsterdam. By the mid-1840s, however, within scarcely five years of Maclaine's death, his surviving partners in Batavia could begin to rely on a regular mail service (though Singapore) that reduced the time lag for information about commodity supply and demand to around six weeks or even less.

The British and the Dutch: the EIC, the VOC and its successors and tensions of empire in maritime Southeast Asia⁵

Increasingly 'compact and connected' Gillian Maclaine's world may indeed have been: it did not signify, however, that it was without major fissures. Like many of his European counterparts and contemporaries, Maclaine's career located him in the realms of Western empire building in Asia at a time of considerable frontier expansion and imperial

³ Gillian Maclaine to John Gregorson, London, 8 February, 1831, Greenfield MSS (in private possession, UK).

⁴ For contemporary accounts of the overland route in the mid-nineteenth century, see F. Junghuhn, *Terugreis van Java naar Europa met de zoogenaamde Engelsche Overlandpost, in de Maanden September to October 1848*, Zalt-Bommel: Joh, Norman & Zoon, 1851, pp. 4-14; and Jhr. Mr. W.T. Gevers Deynoot, *Herinneringen eener Reis naar Nederlandsch Indie in 1862*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1864, pp. 1-25. For a recent overview, see Femme Gastra, 'The Experience of Travelling to the Dutch East Indies by the Overland Route, 1844-1869', in Gordon Jackson & David M. Williams (eds), *Shipping, technology, and imperialism: papers presented to the third British-Dutch Maritime History Conference*, Aldershot: Scholar Press/ Brookfield: Ashgate, 1996, pp. 120-37. For prior history, see Holden Furber, 'The Overland route to India in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Journal of Indian History* 29 (1951), pp.105-33.

⁵ The following account draws gratefully on Nicholas Tarling, *Anglo-Dutch Rivalry in the Malay World 1780-1824* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962); Tarling, "The Prince of Merchants and the Lion City", *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 36, 1 (1964) pp.20-40; E.H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries, 1780-1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in Southeast Asia, 1770-1890* (London & New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998); H.V. Bowen, *The Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756-1833* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Anthony Webster, *The Twilight*; Bowen, Mancke & Reid, *Britain's Oceanic Empire*.

consolidation, with all the external and internal tensions inherent therein.⁶ Maclaine's actual location, however, was a highly distinctive (though hardly unique) one that saw him straddled between two different empires: the British one from which he heralded (and with which he remained closely connected) and the Dutch one in the Netherlands Indies where he worked and settled. As will be argued, although the relations between the two were sometimes antagonistic, it was also the case that rivalry and potential for conflict was tempered by the need for mutual accommodation.

Until the latter's collapse at the very end of the eighteenth century, Anglo-Dutch imperial and commercial rivalries in Asian waters took place within the framework of the (British) East India Company (EIC) and the VOC (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*) or Dutch East India Company. The VOC went under, as part of the more general disintegration of the *ancien regime* in Holland in the wake of the French revolutionary wars. Its British counterpart, however, survived another half century or more, and provided the essential background – and often very much more than that – in which Maclaine and his British contemporaries conducted their business not only in the East but also in London. Although the EIC lost its monopoly on trade to the Indian sub-continent in 1813 and subsequently experienced the 'privatisation' of its trade to China some two decades later, it remained a formidable presence, operating in a sometimes uneasy symbiosis with 'private' UK mercantile interests.

It was partly the invasion and conquest of Java by EIC forces in 1811 that paved the way for Maclaine's subsequent career there, in so far as it opened up the island to a degree of British mercantile penetration that was not extinguished by the colony's return to Dutch control in 1816 (as part of a post-Napoleonic settlement in Europe designed to bolster the newly formed Kingdom of the Netherlands against any future expansionist designs on the part of the French). The subsequent foundation of Singapore (however 'unauthorised') by one of its representatives demonstrated clearly enough that the EIC remained a significant presence in maritime Southeast Asia long after its withdrawal from Java, and incidentally provided Maclaine with another theatre of commercial activity. Moreover, as we shall see, it was the EIC's role as a major supplier of Indian-produced opium to the world market that had an important influence in Maclaine Watson's mercantile fortunes during the final decade of its founder's life.

Alongside and permeating this larger geopolitical framework of the EIC's influence on Maclaine's mercantile trajectory, moreover, was an altogether more mundane but equally vital one. When, for example, Maclaine first sailed to the Indies in 1820, he did so on board a ship captained by a man who had formerly been the in the EIC's service, and observed that on board "everything is carried on quite in the Company style. I am pretty certain that there is not a smarter private trader out of London."⁷ As we shall see, moreover, the senior partner in the House in which he served his 'apprenticeship' in London, far from coincidentally, was an individual who had cut his commercial teeth as a ships' surgeon in the EIC's service, while Maclaine himself, returning in some haste to the UK as a sick man at the beginning of 1830, found a berth on one of the EIC's ships en route from Canton to London. Once in London, furthermore, he found providential financial backing from a man who was also an EIC stockholder.

⁶ For a classic overview, see John Darwin, *The Empire Project. The Rise and Fall of the British World System*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

⁷ Gillian Maclaine to Marjorie Maclaine ("off Beachy Head"), 21 April, 1820, Osborne-Maclaine MSS (O-M MSS), Gloucestershire Record Office.

However, for all that the multifaceted world of the EIC played an inescapable part in Maclaine's own history, the fact that he chose to establish himself outside its immediate realm was of critical importance. Arriving at Batavia in 1820, he found himself in a Dutch colony presided over by a Dutch Governor-General and by a potentially formidable Dutch colonial officialdom. Still only half-formed at this stage in its evolution, the nascent Indies bureaucracy was nonetheless the inheritor of a set of lordly political and social assumptions both from its monopolistic VOC predecessor and from the pre-colonial Javanese state that it was in the process of supplanting. It was also the inheritor, moreover, of nearly two centuries of Anglo-Dutch maritime rivalry on the high seas that had several times erupted into war – the last as recent as 1780–84. Maclaine, in short, found himself in a potentially unfriendly environment: a stranger in some-one else's colony.

Java's return to the Dutch in 1816, (along with most other Dutch possessions in maritime Southeast Asia) had seen the withdrawal from the island of EIC personnel, both military and civilian. Nonetheless, the EIC retained a foothold at Bencoolen on the west coast of neighbouring Sumatra – and a very imperial interest in the region as whole, not least because of its key position between India and China and because of the extent of British-Indian mercantile investment in maritime Southeast Asia itself. Bencoolen was a backwater, but in 1819 the EIC's Governor there, Sir Stamford Raffles, who had been Lieutenant-Governor of Java under the British occupation, went on to found a new settlement at Singapore. Scarcely nine-hundred kilometres to the north, and better commercially positioned on Southeast Asia's major east-west sea-lane than was Batavia, it soon began to become a major entrepot for traders of all nationalities.

Moreover, while British officials and troops had left Java in 1816, a number of British trader and planters had stayed on. There can be little doubt that they formed the most dynamic European element in the commercial life of an island that was otherwise dominated by Indies (Indonesian)-Chinese, Arab and Armenian traders and capitalists. Their Dutch counterparts were both few in number and, for the most part, lacking in the requisite mercantile connections with Europe or Asian commercial centres.

The situation was potentially one, in short, in which the Dutch flag flew over a colony whose commercial sinews were in cosmopolitan, 'alien' hands. Antagonism on this score, with regard to 'foreign' Europeans at least, was by no means universal among Dutch officials, some of whom were distinctly Anglophile in their outlook. Even so, a series of incidents and developments during the 1820s suggested a degree of defensiveness on the part of the Dutch, who initially refused to recognise the legitimacy of the new settlement at Singapore and agitated for its abandonment in negotiations with the British government. The Batavia authorities' contemporaneous action against the spread of European plantation enterprise in South Central Java at around the same time was partly justified in official circles in terms of the need to curb the foreign (i.e. British) presence in the island's interior. Most significant of all, however, in 1824 the Dutch home Government was instrumental in establishing a trading company – the Netherlands Trading Association (*Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij*) or NHM – with the avowed purpose of preventing British domination of Java's overseas commerce, and conferred on it privileges that presaged, so it might appear, a revival of the monopolistic pretensions of the VOC.⁸

⁸Founded in 1824, the NHM became the biggest European business house operating in the colony in the mid-nineteenth century and both the commercial agent of the Indies Government and (until 1850) its bankers. As such, the company enjoyed what seemed, at times, the status of a quasi-governmental enterprise. By virtue of

Nonetheless, in the same year, the Treaty of London, signed after much haggling between the Dutch and their British counterparts, promised an accommodation of sorts between British and Dutch interests in Asia. British claims on Bencoolen were abandoned, but in return the Dutch had to recognise Singapore – and, implicitly, accept British hegemony on the vital east side of the Malacca strait. On the European front, however, the ‘Belgian’ revolt against the Dutch crown at the end of the decade signalled the nineteenth century nadir of Anglo–Dutch relations. For a variety of reasons, London took the side of the ‘rebels’ and it might even have come to war – but did not. Matters were not finally resolved, however, until 1839, when the Dutch finally resigned themselves to the independence of their erstwhile southern provinces and relations with the UK were normalised.

Even so, such tensions of empire as existed in Southeast Asia between the Dutch and the British were mitigated by a number of factors. There were significant synergies, and accommodation was as an important a theme as was (potential) conflict. Hostility to British commercial ‘pretensions’ in the region, for example, did not stop the Indies Government from embarking in the mid-1820s on a grand scheme for raising a massive loan in Calcutta designed to tide over the crisis-ridden Indies treasury and to be brokered by the great British-Indian merchant and financier John Palmer. The negotiations eventually proved abortive – though not before Palmer himself had paid a visit to Java and had no doubt wine and dined with Dutch officials as well as resident British merchants.⁹ The Palmer Loans Affair remained, nonetheless, an indication of the mutualistic (as well as the sometimes conflicted) aspects of the Dutch and British imperial presence in Asia – as well as of the serious divisions over policy manifest in the inner councils of the Indies Government and in relations between Batavia and The Hague.

Within a larger context, moreover, the Dutch had perforce to accept that British (and other foreign European) mercantile houses played a continuing and significant role in the import-export trade of the Indies. Subsequently, the Dutch also needed skilled British personnel to help ensure the successful industrialisation of the large-scale commodity production of sugar that was a key dimension of the mid-nineteenth century *Cultuurstelsel* or System of [State] Cultivations that was introduced in 1830 to stave off the colonial state’s imminent bankruptcy.¹⁰ It was no accident that even the NHM, the Dutch company founded in 1824 to bolster Dutch trade with the Indies and fight off British competition, found itself employing an Englishman at the helm of the great industrially-equipped sugar factory that it created in Central Java in the 1850s as a model for the rest of the island’s colonial sugar producers.¹¹ It is possible, of course, to overstate the degree of the accommodation between

their political connections, as well as the large amount of capital at their disposal – nominally 34.5 million guilders, subscribed by mostly Dutch stockholders – and the wide scope of their business, it played a dominant role in the commercial life of the Indies (and a major role in the Netherlands itself). For an authoritative recent overview of the company’s history, see Ton De Graaf, *Voor Handel en Maatschappij*, Omslagontwerp: Nico Richter, 2012.

⁹ For authoritative analysis of the negotiations between John Palmer and the Indies Government, see Nicholas Tarling, ‘The Palmer Loans’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 119 (1963) pp. 161-188.

¹⁰ See Ulbe Bosma, ‘Het Cultuurstelsel en Zijn Buitenlandse Ondernemers’, *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis*, 2:2 (2005), pp. 3-28. Bosma’s argument – that “a group of migrants of foreign [i.e., non-Dutch] origin played a crucial role in the functioning of the Cultivation System” and that “the pioneers in both trade and plantation were emphatically a multi-national crowd” – is impressively underpinned by data from the colonial archives relating to European and Armenian immigration into the Indies during the first half of the nineteenth century. See also E.C.M. van Enk, *Britse Koopleiden en de Cultuurs op Java. Harvey Thompson (1790-1837) en Zijn Financiers*, PhD thesis, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 1999.

¹¹ G. Roger Knight, ‘Technology, Technicians and Bourgeoisie: Thomas Jeoffries Edwards and the Industrial Project in Sugar in Mid-Nineteenth Century Java’, in Ulbe Bosma, Juan Giusti-Cordero & G. Roger Knight

British interests and Dutch needs. Even so, there is a strong argument that Java from the 1820s through into the mid-century was a much more cosmopolitan colonial enterprise than has often been realised. It was one in which, as we shall see, Maclaine and his associates featured prominently.

Commodity chains: cotton, coffee and opium

The nexus between imperial history and the evolution of world-wide commodity chains that linked producers through international trade to markets and consumers is a central theme of Gillian Maclaine's story.¹² In so far as they transcended empire and its confines, the commodity chains in which Maclaine and those like him were enmeshed were global rather than imperial in character. Of course, during the nineteenth century commodity chains intersected with imperial concerns at virtually every juncture. Even so, though far from autonomous, such chains had complex dynamics that cannot be simply subsumed under the mantle of empire. In this context, Maclaine's activities illuminate what Jonathan Curry-Machado has recently remarked upon as a "transnational, trans-imperial perspective" that extends beyond already widely recognised "mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires'" to a consideration of "how porous such geopolitical boundaries were when it came to the production and trade of global commodities."¹³ The history of the foundational years of Maclaine Watson alerts us to the constant interplay of tensions along commodity chains that were always 'works-in-progress' whose links, far from being permanently forged, were subject to disruption from a multiplicity of causes.

Essentially, there were three commodity chains in which Gillian Maclaine and his associates had a stake. The first involved them in the importation and distribution of cotton cloth for local manufacture into apparel, and the other two saw them engaged in the drug trade as dealers in caffeine (in the form of coffee beans) and opium. Of the three, it is cotton goods stand out, not only because of the sheer ubiquity of the commodity but also because of the extent of the global reach of the chain in which it was bound up.

What took Maclaine from London to Java in 1820 was, quite literally, a ship-load of cotton goods that most probably originated in the industrial mills of Glasgow, some hundred miles or more to the south of his own Highland birthplace. Yet, the raw material from which they were manufactured came from much further afield, primarily the Americas.¹⁴ Likewise, Java was far from being the terminal point of the commodity chain in which Maclaine and his firm became enmeshed. As we shall see, a significant proportion of the cotton piece goods that Maclaine imported into Java were shipped from there throughout the 'Eastern Isles' of the Indonesian archipelago, while other shipments reached Manila in the Philippines and

(eds), *Sugarlandia Revisited: Sugar and Colonialism in Asia and the Americas, 1800 to 1940*, London & New York: Berghahn Publishers, 2007, pp.31-52.

¹² See in particular, Jennifer Bair, 'Global Commodity Chains: Genealogy and Review', in Jennifer Bair (ed.), *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp.1-34.

¹³ Jonathan Curry-Machado (ed.), *Global Histories, Imperial Commodities, Local Interactions*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2103, pp. viii-ix, 5.

¹⁴ On Glasgow cotton goods manufacture, and the provenance of the industry's raw material, see Anthony Cooke, *The Rise and Fall of the Scottish Cotton Industry*, Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2010. Cooke (pp. 45ff) remarks that late in the eighteenth century: "The West Indies and South America dominated [raw] cotton imports into Scotland," but that thereafter slave-grown cotton from the southern United States played an increasingly important role. Indeed, by 1811 raw cotton from the United States accounted for 46 percent of imports along the Clyde.

Canton in southern China. The trade was also opening up, moreover, in the form of shipments of British manufactured cottons that reached the new European outposts on the Australian landmass and in the adjoining Pacific.¹⁵

The crucial point about the cotton commodity chain, however, was that during Maclaine's own lifetime it was famously in the throes of a rapid and dramatic transformation that saw the Indian sub-continent, previously the world's largest producer-exporter of the commodity, turned into perhaps the world's single largest cotton goods importer. Driven above all by the continually falling price of slave-grown raw cotton from the Americas, seconded by technological advances, and buttressed by an Imperial political economy of trade, the industrialised factories of Lancashire and Scotland (with some subsidiary developments in continental Europe) took over from Indian producers as the key manufacturing 'nodes' (to adopt the terminology of World Systems analysis) of cotton's global commodity chain. The consequence of these several developments, as D. A. Farnie argued more than a quarter of a century ago, was that "the traditional balance of the textile trade between East and West was decisively and apparently permanently overturned in favour of Europe."¹⁶

If it was cotton that brought Maclaine to Java, however, it was coffee that kept him there, at a key nodal point of a commodity chain of considerable antiquity and significance. Viewed as a chain, coffee was a good deal more rudimentary than cotton. Producers and traders on the periphery supplied the core with a product that needed virtually no further processing (beyond the artisan roasting and grinding of the beans – and even that might be dispensed with) before it reached consumers. The instant coffee industry and all it implied for the character of the global commodity chain in coffee was still on the distant horizon. Likewise in contrast to cotton, coffee was a chain whose production nodes – characterised virtually exclusively by low cost labour inputs, the absence of high technology and correspondingly relatively minimal requirements for capital – were world-wide in their location, while their prime distribution and consumption nodes were located in Western Europe and North America. Pushing this contrast yet further, during the opening decades of the nineteenth century, coffee remained essentially "an urban luxury good."¹⁷

Even so, the coffee commodity chain did parallel its cotton counterpart in one important respect. With the emergence of Brazil as the main source of world production, it too was undergoing a major transformation in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Prior to that, the cultivation of the coffee bean had first spread from its African origins into Arabia and Asia. It now took pride of place in the Americas, and though coffee remained an essentially multi-sourced commodity chain to an extent that its cotton-goods counterpart (for much of the nineteenth century) was not, the sheer quantity of American coffee coming onto

¹⁵ Supplying the Australian market – possibly with 're-exported' cotton goods and most certainly with 'Asian' produce such as sugar and rice – was potentially lucrative business for 'Country Traders' operating out of Asian ports. In Maclaine's case, commercial ventures in the Australian colonies extended to the purchase of land for the purpose of producing commodities, viz. sheep's wool. At a slightly later date, operating out of Calcutta, Mackinnon and his associates were also keen to explore the Australian market; Mackinnon himself visited Australia, but got his fingers burnt when companies with which he was associated in Sydney and Melbourne collapsed. See J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and his business network, 1823-93*, Rochester: Boydell Press, 2003, pp. 26-8.

¹⁶ D. A. Farnie, *The English Cotton Industry and the World Market 1815-1896*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p.96.

¹⁷ Steven Topik, 'Historicizing Commodity Chains. Five Hundred Years of the Global Coffee Commodity Chain', in Jennifer Bair (ed.), *Frontiers of Commodity Chain Research*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, p.43.

the market – by 1850 Brazil accounted for over half the world’s recorded output¹⁸ – meant that production areas elsewhere lost any price-setting advantage that they had earlier enjoyed. Maclaine, as we shall see, was to discover this to his cost.

Opium was the basis of the third commodity chain in which Maclaine Watson appears to have become enmeshed. This particular chain – one which seems to have originated in the second half of the eighteenth century – linked peasant poppy growers in India (and counterparts in Turkey) to opium importers and consumers thousands of miles by sea to the east where it financed European purchases of Chinese goods, tea above all. In this context, at the beginning of the 1840s, the trade became the occasion of the first ‘Opium War’ between the UK and Peking that signalled the beginning of a hundred years of British commercial hegemony on the ‘China Coast’. Under East India Company rule in the sub-continent, opium was a state monopoly: Indian cultivators of poppy had to process their raw material into dry cakes before delivery to Company agents or contractors, prior to its public sale at Company auctions in Calcutta. From there, the bulk of it was exported eastward, much of it to Canton, by private merchants rather than by the Company itself – which needed the cash raised from its sale in China to pay for its purchases there, but also needed to circumvent the (formal) prohibition placed on the drugs import by the Chinese authorities.¹⁹ Even so, China was by no means the sole destination for the increasing quantities of opium manufactured in the Indian sub-continent under the auspices of the EIC from the mid-eighteenth century onward. As the business historian Anthony Webster argues, Southeast Asia was also an important point of sale, and “though smaller than the China market, the region’s consumption of the drug was significant”, especially in so far as it provided a “secondary... market... when the Chinese market was depressed or an alternative route into [that] market at times of resistance to opium imports by the Chinese state.”²⁰

The essential conduit of this opium commodity chain that led through the maritime Southeast Asia into southern China was the so-called ‘Country Trade’. Essentially a network of intra-Asian commercial circuits, the Country Trade appears to have originated among South Asian merchants trading eastward across the Indian Ocean, and must have had antecedents dating back to the fifteenth century or earlier. From the late eighteenth century European trading houses began to participate in the Trade on a considerable scale, when it became the conduit for carrying cotton goods (eventually British cotton goods) and – of course – opium from India eastwards. Southeast Asian goods themselves also played a considerable, albeit unquantifiable, part in the trade.²¹ It was their rapidly expanding involvement in this trade that may well have accounted for much of Maclaine Watson’s prosperity during the last decade of its founder’s life. It not only brought prosperity, but also demonstrated – if such a demonstration is indeed necessary – the degree of interface between European and Asian commercial ventures. Indeed, the involvement in the opium trade of

¹⁸ Topik (2009), p.46.

¹⁹ See H. R. C. Wright, *East Indian Economic Problems in the Age of Cornwallis and Raffles*, London: Luzac, 1961, pp.106-65. For its export eastwards, see Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China, 1800-42*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951 [1969], pp.104-123; Le Pichon *China Trade and Empire*, pp. 16–20.

²⁰ Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British imperialism in Southeast Asia, 1770-1890*, London: I. B. Tauris, 1998, p. 57.

²¹ South East Asian goods (trepang, spices, birds’ nests and sugar etc.) also bulked large in the Country Trade to China. See, for example, James Warren, *The Sulu zone 1768-1898: The Dynamics of External Trade, Slavery, and Ethnicity in the Transformation of a Southeast Asian Maritime State*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981; Heather Sutherland, ‘Trepang and Wangkang: the China Trade of Eighteenth Century Makassar c. 1720s - 1840s’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 156,3 (2000), pp. 451-72.

European mercantile houses, Maclaine Watson among them, would have been impossible without it.

Commodity chains, World Systems Analysis and developments on the Asian ‘periphery’

Despite the obvious utility of employing the concept of commodity chains to illuminate the fortunes of the mercantile (and plantation) enterprises in which Gillian Maclaine was engaged during the 1820s and 1830s, some serious problems remain. They relate, in particular, to the potential for distortion of the evolving history of Maclaine Watson created by a propensity to link commodity chains to World Systems analysis in ways that fail to account for what we shall see to be the firm’s relative autonomy and independence.

Commodity chains are frequently referenced to concepts of World Systems in which (metropolitan) core areas or states are conceived as subordinating (colonial) peripheries and as playing a vital role in the articulation of such Systems.²² The dynamics of the articulating process remain, nonetheless, problematic to a degree – as does “the dominant historiography of the world system, with its clear-cut division between centre, periphery and semi-periphery.”²³ The periphery appears to be a substantially more complex subject than World Systems Analysis originally proposed. To be sure, that analysis is neither totally homogeneous nor invariably dogmatic in its assertions. Gereffi, Korzeniewicz and Korzeniewicz for example, suggest that “within a commodity chain a *relatively* greater share of wealth *generally* accrues to core-like nodes than to peripheral ones”;²⁴ while Wallerstein himself notes that “the bare-bones imagery [of core and periphery] is much too simple.”²⁵ Even so, it is precisely those ‘bare-bones’ that have made such an impression on scholarly literature, and which need to be fleshed out with something altogether more nuanced.

As has been observed of the situation in the Latin American ‘periphery’, for example, existing colonial merchant firms might survive the onslaught of metropolitan finance capital by seeking refuge in specialist commodity trades, where their local knowledge, special requirements of the commodity and existing investment in technology might provide a barrier against take-over.²⁶ Much the same might be said of Java where, for instance, a world-class sugar industry grew up in the middle decades of the nineteenth century largely devoid of metropolitan financial control, together with a European mercantile community largely devoid of metropolitan ‘parents’.²⁷ Within this context, the case of Maclaine Watson demonstrates the contested nature of the metropolitan-colonial tie, and in so doing raises questions about

²² Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000. On the nexus between Commodity Chains and World Systems, see Gary Gereffi, Miguel Korzeniewicz & Roberto D. Korzeniewicz, ‘Introduction: Global Commodity Chains’, in Gary Gereffi & Miguel Korzeniewicz (eds), *Commodity Chains and Global Capitalism*, Westport: Praeger, 1994, pp.1-14.

²³ Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 295.

²⁴ Gereffi et al. (1994), p.2 [emphasis added].

²⁵ Terence K. Hopkins & Immanuel Wallerstein, ‘Commodity Chains: Construct and Research’, in Gereffi & Korzeniewicz (1994), pp.17-20.

²⁶ C. Jones, ‘British Imperialism and the Argentine, 1875-1900: A Theoretical Note’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 12:2 (1980), pp.437-44.

²⁷ Ulbe Bosma, ‘Sugar and Dynasty in Yogyakarta’, in Bosma et al. (2007), pp.73-94; Bosma (2005); G. Roger Knight, ‘Descrying the Bourgeoisie: Sugar, Capital and the State in the Netherlands Indies, c. 1840-1884’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 163:1 (2007), pp.52-83; G. Roger Knight, ‘Rescued from the Myths of Time: Toward a Reappraisal of European Mercantile Houses in Mid-Nineteenth Century Java, c. 1830-1870’, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 170:1 (2014), pp.313-1.

the explanatory value of ‘World Systems’ in general, suggesting that they fail to allow for the sheer diversity of global patterns of production and distribution – and for the power of agency on the (Asian) periphery.

Old companies and new firms: the global reorganisation of trade, 1800-1860

It is to developments on that periphery to which we can now turn. Obviously enough, commodity chains were articulated at critical junctures by mercantile activity in both metropole and colony. In this context, the complex currents that Maclaine had to negotiate as merchant (and planter) in a foreign empire had a further dimension that related to major structural changes in the global commercial-financial nexus between metropole and colony. Simply stated, in relation to European mercantile operations in Asia three things were happening. The first was the demise – in the case of the EIC very much drawn out in contrast to the sudden collapse of the VOC, its erstwhile Dutch counterpart – of the great European monopoly companies that had previously dominated the scene. The second was the centralisation of commercial and financial power and authority on the metropole – one writer, discussing primarily the Anglo-sphere, has described the phenomenon as the “London-isation of commerce”.²⁸ The third point – and one very much concomitant with this latter development – concerns the undermining of the autonomy of those colonial mercantile firms that had emerged in the wake of the great companies, together with the subsequent subordination of colonial mercantile activity to the dictates of metropolitan ‘parents’.

In relation to the first point – the demise of the great Companies that had monopolised large swathes of the colonial trade to (and within) Asia for the previous two centuries – the business historian Anthony Webster has recently advanced the thesis that “The Twilight of the East India Company” was a development characterised by the conflicted yet also often overlapping interests of ‘private’ mercantile capital and of the Company’s directors. It was further complicated, moreover, in the case of the Indian sub-continent, by the collapse – in the 1830s – of the substantially autonomous Agency Houses of Calcutta and elsewhere that had grown up in a degree of complementarity with the EIC from the late eighteenth century onward. Even so, the secular trend was toward the replacement of monopoly concerns in the mercantile sphere with the competing interests of a variety of ‘private’ operators.²⁹

In the Dutch sphere, meanwhile, a parallel and significantly earlier development to the demise of the EIC had occurred with the bankruptcy of the VOC at the very end of the eighteenth century. There, too – and primarily on the key Indonesian island of Java – new firms grew up in the wake of the demise of a monopoly trading enterprise. Of course, there were differences. Nonetheless, there were also clear parallels. In post-VOC Java, new commercial houses emerged in the shadow of the pretensions to maintain some aspects of its monopoly by the colonial regime that supplanted it. Not for nothing did the newly-founded NHM (see above), gain the appellation in the Indies of ‘*Compagnie Keijl*’ or ‘Little Company’ in reference to its VOC predecessor, with all which that implied about the potentially adverse nexus between it and the colony’s ‘private’ traders. What made the situation altogether more volatile, moreover, was that – as we have already seen – many of these ‘private’ traders were British rather than Dutch. Among them was the firm of Maclaine

²⁸ C. Jones as quoted in Darwin (2012), p. 63.

²⁹ Anthony Webster, *The Twilight of the East India Company: the evolution of Anglo-Asian commerce and politics, 1790-1860*, Woodbridge & Rochester: Boydell Press, 2009.

Watson founded in 1827 but subsuming an earlier mercantile business: Gillian Maclaine and Co., founded in Batavia some five years earlier.

The second and third of these developments – the increasing, mid–nineteenth century domination by metropolitan interests and the concomitant undermining of colonial autonomy – can best be dealt with conjointly. Broadly speaking, the argument is that around the middle of the nineteenth century metropolitan commercial and financial capital began to exert a hitherto unprecedented degree of control over the global periphery. It did so because of the way in which such control, fuelled by economic growth in the core, was facilitated by developments in communications and transport.³⁰ In particular, the case has been made that the mid-century decades saw “a revolution in the *organisation* of British firms in Asia, and the nature of British economic relations with Asia”, partly predicated on the replacement of an earlier generation of quasi-autonomous European mercantile houses with a new breed of enterprise much more in thrall to metropolitan financial and commercial interests than had been the case with their immediate predecessors: “while this curtailment of independence was not total, it did mean that the new firms had to be much more responsive to the needs of their London parents, who in many cases had supplied [their] capital...”³¹

The point is well taken. Yet, it is not the whole picture, anymore than the ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ binary upon which it appears to rest is a satisfactory way of analysing the world economy. In fact, in some parts of the world at least, local (colonial) interests demonstrated a greater degree of continuing autonomy – were more resilient, more resistant to metropolitan takeover – than is sometimes supposed. The Dutch colonial empire was a case in point, characterised it might be argued (as was also the case with its Spanish contemporary) by a weak ‘core’ and a strong ‘periphery’ – and by colonial-metropolitan ties the nature of which largely belied notions of peripheral ‘subjugation’. Maclaine Watson was a prime case in point.

Intra–Asian commerce and the ‘Country Trade’

That degree of autonomy leads, in turn, to the issue of the Asian context of European businesses like Maclaine Watson, and to a concomitant focus on intra-Asian commerce, rather than on that which was carried on bilaterally between Asia and Europe or North America. Autonomy, it may be suggested, had as an important corollary that mercantile firms based in the Asian colonial ‘periphery’ might be more open than off-shoots of metropolitan concerns to the advantages of integrating into Asian commercial circuits rather than basing their activities primarily or exclusively on inter-continental trade. This was certainly the case with Maclaine Watson.

As Huw Bowen has recently reminded us, when European ships first rounded the Cape in the sixteenth century they found themselves in:

³⁰ See for example Darwin (2012), p.63.

³¹ Webster (2009), pp.10-14 & 91-2.

a trading world that was mature and sophisticated, with an interlocking series of regional circuits that facilitated the movement of commodities, people and information ... thereby connecting far-flung littoral societies and economies.³²

The maritime 'Country Trade' that had developed eastward from the ports of the Indian sub-continent from around the sixteenth century onward has long been recognised as an important dimension of these circuits and, as Claude Markovits has convincingly argued with relation to later developments:

[such] Asian networks did not form a kind of global sub-formation within the European-dominated international economy of nineteenth and early twentieth century Asia. Actually, each network found a place in the global system through a complex and prolonged process to which collaboration and conflict were intertwined themes.³³

The grand narrative predicated on reappraisals of this kind – namely that “International [commercial/mercantile] contacts between Asian countries... [are] fundamental to the understanding of the region’s economic modernisation”³⁴ – is something that can only be touched on in the present context, yet is not irrelevant to an evaluation of the history of Maclaine Watson. Specifically, during the final years of its founder’s life, the firm was engaged in the Country Trade to an extent that presaged its later evolution into a network of Asia-based mercantile concerns that, from the late nineteenth century onward, were founded, first and foremost, in intra-Asian trade. In short, and in however tentative a fashion, the history of Maclaine Watson needs to be understood in terms not only of Maclaine’s own long association with the UK (and Europe), but also in terms of his firm’s positioning in a burgeoning world of Asian commerce.

A mercantile network of family firms

The more immediate point, however, concerns the structural characteristics of the mercantile business that Maclaine founded in 1827 with the establishment first of Maclaine Watson itself and subsequently of associated companies in Java and Singapore. Some of the key points at issue are discussed succinctly in Forbes Munro’s monumental work on *Maritime Enterprise and Empire* in the context of the Mackinnon mercantile enterprise – another, chronologically somewhat later business with roots in a similar ethnic background to that in which the Maclaine concern was embedded. Inter alia, some of the key traits that Munro identifies include the absence of a ‘parent’ company; the ‘compensating’ existence of a cluster of firms in the hands of inter-related families or of more distant ‘clan’ members; and the defining

³² H. V. Bowen, ‘Britain in the Indian Ocean Region and Beyond: contours, connections and the creation of a global maritime empire’, in H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke & John G. Reid, *Britain's Oceanic Empire: Atlantic and India Ocean Worlds, c.1550-1850*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.54

³³ Markovits (2000), p.19.

³⁴ Kaoru Sugihara, ‘An Introduction’, in Kaoru Sugihara (ed.), *Japan, China and the Growth of the Asian International Economy, 1850-1949*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.1-20. See also Shinya Sugiyama & Linda Grove, ‘Introduction’, in Shinya Sugiyama & Linda Grove (eds), *Commercial Networks in Modern Asia*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001, pp.1-14; Linda Grove & Mark Selden, ‘Editor’s Introduction: New Perspectives on China, East Asia and the Global Economy’, in Takeshi Hamashita, *China, East Asia and the Global Economy*, London & New York: Routledge, 2008, pp.1-11.

presence of “networks of corporate organizations as alternatives to the managerialist, hierarchical structure of big business.”³⁵

Of course, the Mackinnon enterprise operated on a vastly grander scale in three or even four continents and under a chief whose business and political clout was of a totally different order to anything that Gillian Maclaine and his successors ever aspired to. Nonetheless, there are significant, albeit much humbler, parallels, since the essential point about Maclaine’s own mercantile enterprises was that they evolved, from the 1820s onward, into a network of Asia-based mercantile concerns, rather than a single, hierarchically organised enterprise. Held together by the ties of consanguinity and by wider ethnic loyalties, the network was essentially made up of family firms – even though the families involved were not those of its founders, and included Dutchmen and Englishmen as well as the inevitable Scots. ³⁶It formed, in short, an outstanding example of the extent to which (as business historian Geoffrey Jones has argued) “families could be as successful as managers in owning and managing business concerns....Socialization and strong corporate cultures could be as effective as hierarchy as a means of control of employees.” ³⁷ The character of that ‘corporate culture’ is something to which we can now turn

Calling Scotland ‘Home’: diasporic culture and the ‘Scots in the East’.

The importance of the role played by ethnic Scots is common currency in the history of the making of the British Empire. Munro, for example, writing about Mackinnon and his business ventures, noted the presence of primordial loyalties predicated on something more than simple consanguinity, and referred in telling fashion to a new “enterprise network drawing deeply on an older sub-soil of Highland history and values.”³⁸ Expressed rather differently, “the Scottish blend of commerce, shipping and Presbyterianism with either local capital or reinvestment of overseas financial returns was a powerful one.”³⁹

Specific attention to ‘the Scots in the East’ has not been absent from discussion, ranging from accounts of the ‘Shanghailanders’ of the China coast,⁴⁰ through to their counterparts in the Indian sub-continent.⁴¹ In relation to the Scots in Java and elsewhere in the erstwhile Netherlands Indies, however, the pickings are very much slimmer. Obviously the Scots’ presence in a Dutch colony was likely to have been less pervasive than within the British Empire. It was also more likely, however, to have engendered a greater than usual sense of group solidarity. Moreover, during the twenty years that Maclaine was in Java

³⁵ Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire*, pp. 4–5 & 88–90.

³⁶ Crickhowell, *Rivers Join*, pp.131–4.

³⁷ Geoffrey Jones, “Alfred Chandler and the Importance of Organization”, *Enterprise and Society* 9, 3 (2008) pp. 419–21. Jones’s broader argument is that—contrary to notions of the key role of the “Visible Hand” of a hierarchical, impersonal management in successful business – that “there was “not ‘one best way’ and no linear progression in organizational forms in business organisation.”

³⁸ Munro (2003), pp.5-6.

³⁹ Andrew Porter, “‘Gentlemanly capitalism’ and empire: the British experience since 1750?”, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 18:3 (1990), p.277.

⁴⁰ See for example, Robert Bickers, ‘Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843-1937’, *Past and Present* 159 (1998), pp.161-211.

⁴¹ See for example, James G. Parker, ‘Scottish Enterprise in India, 1750-1914’, in R. A. Cage (ed.), *The Scots Abroad*, London: Croom Helm, 1985, pp.191-219; Phillip Constable, ‘Scottish Missionaries, “Protestant Hinduism” and the Scottish Sense of Empire in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century India’, *Scottish Historical Review* 86:2 (2007), pp.278-313.

members of the Scots diaspora played a role in the commercial life of the Indies totally disproportionate to their small numbers.

Historically, the three great ‘classical’ diasporas have been those associated with Greeks, Jews and Armenians. Indeed, it has been argued that a rigorous definition of “diaspora traders” refers to a:

distinct category... engaged in international business... based on trading companies [that] developed into networks of ethnic-religious groups that formed their own ‘unofficial’ international market, [hence] enabling them to operate independently of the countries or states in which they were established.⁴²

Development of any comparable trajectory for the ‘Scots abroad’ is complicated by their location – some might say privileged location – within the imperial complex of the nineteenth century’s largest global superpower. To say the least, such people were not ‘outsiders’ to systems of power or faced with hegemonic commercial relations that somehow needed to be subverted or bypassed. The ‘victim’ status commonly attributed to the human objects of the Highland Clearances sits uneasily with the likes of McKinnon and Maclaine. To be sure, as Tom Devine has recently argued, the “original etymological origins of the word... [imply] a process of human dispersal that can be voluntary and opportunistic rather than necessarily governed by implacable expulsive forces.”⁴³ Even so, problems remain – not least that the Scots Diaspora was far from being a unitary phenomenon. The gentry class origins of most of the people who constituted this particular group of ‘Scots in the East’ helped ensure that most of them remained in Asia for a limited period of time before returning home. Should this cast doubt on the “legitimacy of the use of the category ‘diaspora’ which involves a long-term separation from an imaginary or real homeland and is not really compatible with the phenomenon of transiency or sojourning”?⁴⁴

Be that as it may, the importance, and distinguishing character, of ethnic-religious solidarity was high among the characteristics of the fellow countrymen with whom Gillian Maclaine associated in both London and Java. A crucial factor was their shared Calvinism (and these were the days before the Great Schism of 1843 rent the Scottish church). Maclaine himself, for instance, reported to his mother on his initial surprise at finding candles burning in the Dutch Reformed Church that he attended in Batavia (a ‘Rome-ish’ practice necessitated by the fact that services had to be held after dark, on account of the daytime heat).⁴⁵ More profoundly, proper religious observance was of keen interest in his correspondence with her, and we find him reassuring her that, except when business was unavoidably pressing, he kept the Sabbath free from mundane concerns. Moreover, he also reported that he had admonished the womenfolk of the Calvinist Dutch family into which he subsequently married for bringing their embroidery to the religious services held on board the ship taking them all to the Indies in 1832. Nonetheless, he was prepared to accept – contrary to usage in his part of the Highlands – that the piano might be open on Sundays.⁴⁶

⁴² Gelina Harlaftis, ‘From Diaspora Traders to Shipping Tycoons: The Vagliano Bros’, *Business History Review* 81:2 (Summer 2007), pp.237-68.

⁴³ Tom. M. Devine, *To the Ends of the Earth. Scotland’s Global Diaspora, 1750-2010*, London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2011, p.xiv.

⁴⁴ Markovits (2000), pp.4-5.

⁴⁵ Gillian Maclaine to Marjorie Maclaine, Batavia, 28 December 1834, Greenfield MSS.

⁴⁶ Gillian Maclaine, ‘Journal of a Voyage from Rotterdam to Batavia in 1832’, entry for 24 April 1832, O-M MSS.

The Scots community in Batavia at the time of Maclaine's domicile there may not have had the formal sinews of church attendance – there was only what Maclaine termed “an English chapel” and he evidently preferred going to the Dutch Calvinist Church. In short, the city's Scots community lacked the institutionalised religious observance that characterised its much larger counterpart in contemporary Calcutta, where the Scots Kirk had its own Minister.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, religious observance was and remained an important facet of Diaspora identity. “Piety”, as Munro remarked in the case of Mackinnon, “...strengthened the bonds of trust based on kinship.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile, men – and it was only men whom he encountered in this context – were appraised in terms of their Highland countenances, handshakes and manners. In tandem, he evinced an honest delight in being able to communicate in Gaelic, a language that he had been at pains to acquire (ethnic credentials always being a work in progress) during his youth.⁴⁹

In relation to doing business, however, as was famously the case with other Diaspora communities, the fundamental aspect of this ethnic solidarity related to matters of trust. Ties of kith and kin combined with a wider sense of shared ethnicity to create, in Harlaftis' formulation, a “framework that minimises entrepreneurial risk and provides information flow [and allows] the establishment of transnational connections based on personal relations.”⁵⁰ As Maclaine was to discover, however, trust based on ethnic-religious solidarity was not immune from the pitfalls inherent in business in which he was engaged. Indeed, a misplaced trust in fellow Scots from his own part of the Highlands – family friends of his uncle – was nearly to ruin him. As we shall, moreover, despite its ostensibly ‘Scots’ character, for critical periods in its mid- and late-nineteenth century history, Maclaine Watson was by no means a concern run exclusively by people of Scottish ancestry. Even so, the milieu in which the young Gillian Maclaine grew up, and in which he served his apprenticeship before sailing to Java in 1820, was undoubtedly profoundly Scottish.

Conclusion: commodities, colonial paradigms and inter-Asian trade

Gillian Maclaine's career in business – and as a planter – took place in the context of the growth of ‘private’ European trade in Asia in the wake of the demise of the Dutch VOC (1799) and the curbing (1813, 1833) of the erstwhile monopoly of its British equivalent, the EIC. The Dutch-British imperial character of the enterprise in which he and his contemporaries were engaged, however, was tempered by the global character of the burgeoning commodity chains in which they were enmeshed – and which transcended empire at the same time as they were interwoven with it.

From his initial engagement in the previous decade with two prime colonial commodities – cotton goods and coffee – the young Scot ‘graduated’ by the 1830s to commodities that enabled his business to move away from a heavy and very damaging dependence on bi-lateral trade between Europe and the Southeast Asian ports where he operated. Though the details remain a little hazy, it looks as if Maclaine and his Southeast

⁴⁷ Munro (2003), p.23.

⁴⁸ Munro (2003), p.33.

⁴⁹ Even before going to Java, moreover, he had admonished his brother (then a student in Glasgow) to work hard at his Gaelic: “Unless you pay it considerable attention, you certainly cannot expect to write the language with any facility, much less to speak it fluently” (Gillian Maclaine to Marjorie Maclaine, with Postscript to brother, AM, 15 June 1819, O-M MSS).

⁵⁰ See Harlaftis (2007), pp.240-1.

Asian associates finally owed their hard-won prosperity from participating in several branches of what was an essentially inter-Asian commodity trade, probably including opium.

It is this inter-Asian character, above all, that points to the longer term significance of Maclaine's enterprise – a significance which needs some further elaboration. His own ventures in this direction were presumably largely contingent and did not long survive his premature death in 1840. During the subsequent decades, the Maclaine Watson firm that survived him (it lasted well into the twentieth century) became once again firmly focused on the commodity trade between Southeast Asia and Europe (and, for a while, North America).

At the Java end of that trade, however, the commodity concerned was no longer coffee but sugar, one of the island's major exports from the 1840s onward and by the 1880s its main one. From the late nineteenth century onward, it was sugar's commercial imperatives that drove Maclaine Watson increasingly back toward the inter-Asian commodity trade in which its founder had made his (eventual) fortune some sixty or more years earlier. Indeed, by the opening decades of the twentieth century, Maclaine Watson had become the largest of Java's sugar exporters and a key participant in an inter-Asian trade in the commodity that saw huge quantities of the island's industrially manufactured sugar reach markets in the Indian sub-continent, China and Japan (Europe and North America had by this time almost disappeared from the picture, barring the period of the Great War, when sugar from Java to the British market made up for discontinued supplies from Imperial Germany).

Why this happened has much to say about global commodities, imperial cores and colonial peripheries, for Maclaine Watson's long-term existence belied any easy notion that commodity chains invariably made colonial mercantile activity subservient to metropolitan commercial and financial interests. Maclaine Watson came to play such a major role in the intra-Asian commodity trade in sugar, it may be suggested, because they were and remained free of metropolitan principals. Quite deliberately, Maclaine had set up his firm in Batavia in the late 1820s as a way of cutting ties with erstwhile business partners in London and Calcutta, and Maclaine Watson remained true to its 'colonial' (eventually, ex-colonial) moorings in the Netherlands Indies/Indonesia for the remainder of its existence.

Head office continued to be located in Batavia/Jakarta (from the 1880s there was a London branch/affiliate) and the firm appears to have been largely self-financed – with some assistance from the Indies' premier financial institution, the Java Bank – by the small network of families that ran what remained a quintessentially 'family' firm that never became a public company. Inter alia, this gave Maclaine Watson a 'freedom' of action reinforced by the fact that the Java sugar industry's incipient vertical links with metropolitan refiners collapsed during the third quarter of the nineteenth century and, for a variety of contingent reasons, were not replicated by any of the arrangements that the industry contracted subsequently in its Asian markets.

These developments, taking place over a number of decades, meant that Maclaine Watson was not only an important example of mercantile autonomy located along commodity chains on a colonial periphery, but also became a significant participant in the evolution of modern Asian commerce. From the late nineteenth century onward, the firm was active along the main arteries of trade that linked Bombay and Calcutta through maritime Southeast Asia to Hong Kong, Tokyo and Yokohama as a big provider of a major new commodity – industrially manufactured sugar – both to direct consumers and to refineries, and as such played a role of some substance in that expansion of Asian trade that is widely interpreted as a

key harbinger of modern Asian development in general. It all seems a long way from the Sound of Mull on whose shores the firm's founder had been born. But perhaps it wasn't?

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The mutually reinforcing relationship between 'commodities' and 'empires' has long been recognised. Over the last six centuries the quest for profits has driven imperial expansion, with the global trade in commodities fuelling the ongoing industrial revolution. These 'commodities of empire', which became transnationally mobilised in ever larger quantities, included foodstuffs (wheat, rice, bananas); industrial crops (cotton, rubber, linseed and palm oils); stimulants (sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, tobacco and opium); and ores (tin, copper, gold, diamonds). Their expanded production and global movements brought vast spatial, social, economic and cultural changes to both metropolises and colonies.

In the Commodities of Empire project we explore the networks through which such commodities circulated within, and in the spaces between, empires. We are particularly attentive to local processes – originating in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America – which significantly influenced the outcome of the encounter between the world economy and regional societies, doing so through a comparative approach that explores the experiences of peoples subjected to different imperial hegemonies.

The following key research questions inform the work of project:

- 1) The networks through which commodities were produced and circulated within, between and beyond empires;
- 2) The interlinking 'systems' (political-military, agricultural labour, commercial, maritime, industrial production, social communication, technological knowledge) that were themselves evolving during the colonial period, and through which these commodity networks functioned;
- 3) The impact of agents in the periphery on the establishment and development of commodity networks: as instigators and promoters; through their social, cultural and technological resistance; or through the production of anti-commodities;
- 4) The impact of commodity circulation both on the periphery, and on the economic, social and cultural life of the metropolises;
- 5) The interrogation of the concept of 'globalisation' through the study of the historical movement and impact of commodities.

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