

# Sir James Douglas' Mother and Grandmother

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Ritchie, according to one of Sir James Douglas' daughters, was the maiden name of her grandmother. This statement made by Mrs. Arthur Bushby (Agnes) to Dr. W. N. Sage proved to be the main clue in unravelling to some extent the mystery of Douglas' maternal ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

The only reference to his mother by Douglas himself is found in a notebook entry which gives the date of her death as July 1839.<sup>2</sup> It is also known from his private letter book that his grandmother who died before 5 February 1855, left \$500 to his daughters, and that her estate was still not settled when, in 1868, Douglas was in correspondence concerning the legacy with a Mr. James Stuart, of Georgetown, British Guiana (now Guyana).<sup>3</sup> The natural inference from this address is that this grandmother was his mother's mother.

Thus all that has previously been known to James Douglas' biographers is that his mother, whose maiden name may have been Ritchie, died in July 1839 and that his grandmother, presumably his maternal grandmother, left an estate in or around Demerara, some time before the spring of 1855.

The records of the Public Record Office were combed without success, except for numerous references to members of the Douglas family in Demerara and to the firm of J. T. & A. Douglas & Company to whom James' father, John, belonged. These references confirmed that the family had extensive interests in several sugar plantations and in Georgetown

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<sup>1</sup> Walter N. Sage, *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia* (Toronto, 1930), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> MS. in Provincial Archives, Victoria, quoted in Sage, *Sir James Douglas and British Columbia*, p. 363.

<sup>3</sup> Letters, Douglas to Stuart, 7 October and 28 November 1868. Private letter book, MS. Provincial Archives. James Stuart often acted for members of the Douglas family in Scotland and Demerara, and especially for the firm of J. T. and A. Douglas and Company, as is obvious from a reading of Guyana newspapers.

business premises, but they shed no light on John Douglas' private life, his possible (though not probable) marriage in Demerara, or the birth of James, his brother Alexander and sister Cecilia.

However, a search in *The Royal Gazette of British Guiana*<sup>4</sup> and various other newspapers of the colony, also held in the Public Record Office or the British Library (Colindale), proved more fruitful. The first find was a reference on 31 October 1825 to a Rebecca Ritchie, a "free coloured woman," as executrix of the will of one Richard Telfer. Since Rebecca was the name of one of Douglas' daughters (who died the year of her birth, 1849),<sup>5</sup> as well as his niece, Edith *Rebecca*, daughter of his sister Cecilia and of her second husband, David Cameron,<sup>6</sup> this was an interesting discovery. So was the reference to a "free coloured woman," in view of the long-held belief that James Douglas was not only a Creole, i.e., born in the West Indian Colonies,<sup>7</sup> but a mulatto, i.e., partly coloured.<sup>8</sup>

The *Royal Gazette* of British Guiana, a colony then of 78,734 inhabitants,<sup>9</sup> was the source of considerably more information. Each issue usually gave a list of six to ten persons — presumably only of some social standing<sup>10</sup> — whose deaths had taken place in the preceding days.<sup>11</sup> On 13 July 1839 appeared the name of Miss Martha Ann Telfer, who had died the previous Thursday, namely July 11, in Cumingsburg, a district of

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter *Royal Gazette*. The previous name had been *Esquebo and Demerary Royal Gazette*. It was changed on 1 July 1841 to *The Gazette and General Advertiser of British Guiana*. CO 115/4, P.R.O.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas family tree, MS. Provincial Archives.

<sup>6</sup> The marriage of Edith Rebecca's parents took place on 4 June 1838, according to an entry in the *Royal Gazette*, 5 June 1838: "Married: Yesterday in town, by the Revd. Dr. Struthers — Mr. David Cameron to Mrs. Cecelia Cowan." CO 115/4, P.R.O. The spelling is correct, though I have elsewhere followed the practice of using the more normal spelling of Cecilia. The Rev. James Struthers D.D. was the Minister of St. Andrews, evidently a fashionable church in Georgetown (what is meant by "in town"), the third largest, and the Chief Presbyterian one, where he performed numerous marriages by special licence.

<sup>7</sup> British Guiana, though not strictly speaking in the West Indies, was usually considered as one of that group of colonies because of similarities of climate, crops, population and culture.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these terms, see note 15 below.

<sup>9</sup> Of these 3,006 were Whites, 6,360 Free Blacks and 69,368 Coloured. Blue Book of Statistics for 1838. CO 116/207, P.R.O.

<sup>10</sup> There were 770 interments in Georgetown in 1839 according to Henry G. Dalton, *The History of British Guiana* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855), II, p. 552.

<sup>11</sup> The issues dating from before the end of slavery did not, of course, include slaves in the names of persons deceased. Only the Coroner's monthly list gave names of slaves (and only when their deaths had been sudden).

Georgetown. On September 7 a request for all claims against "the late Mrs. M. A. Telfer" was published in the same paper, to be rendered at the office of Messrs. A. Wishart and Co., Kingston. The "deliberating executor and executrix" were Robert Hazen and Rebecca Ritchie, who, it will be recalled, had first appeared as executrix of the will of Richard Telfer. Finally, the main sale of household goods of the late M. A. Telfer was advertised, still in the *Royal Gazette*, to take place on September 23 at the late residence, Main Street, Cumingsburg, the sale of the balance apparently taking place in February 1840.<sup>12</sup>

So far it has been possible to obtain only one will from Guyana, that of Martha Ann Telfer. This will, filed 16 July 1839 by Robert Hazen, gives the date of death as "on or about the tenth instant," while it would seem that it was actually the eleventh. However, this is a minor point and probably the newspaper was not correctly informed of the day of her death.

In the will, made on 28 June 1839, Martha Ann Telfer states that she was "born in the Island of Barbados," but was residing in "the County of Demerary"<sup>13</sup> in the Colony of British Guiana. After making the customary provisions for payment of debts and leaving two dollars "to the poor of this Colony" she directs that her effects, except for some specific bequests (actually only one) listed afterwards, be "sold and disposed of for the general benefit" of her estate. Her furniture comprised "Mahogany Bedsteads, Hair and Feather Beds, Palliasses, also several articles of Silver and plated Ware."

The one bequest was to her "respected Goddaughter Catherine Hazen," probably a daughter of her executor Robert Hazen, and consisted of "a Glass case containing a number of Books and also any Books appertaining to the same but which may not be therein." The effects indicate a lady, presumably literate, and of some means, or at least comfortably off. A cursory check of auction sale advertisements at this period in Guyana suggests as much.

The residue of the estate was "to be held in trust by the natural Guardians of my dear grandchild Cecile<sup>14</sup> Cowan, daughter of Mrs. David Cameron, born Douglas." Here at last was proof that Martha Ann Telfer was indeed the mother of James Douglas and his sister Cecilia (Cowan) Cameron.

<sup>12</sup> Sale advertised in the *Royal Gazette*, 11 February 1840. CO 115/5, P.R.O.

<sup>13</sup> The common spelling then for Demerara.

<sup>14</sup> The spelling of the name is clearly this French version.

But the will added a most important piece of information, for the executors listed were not only Alexander Wishart (obviously, from the legal notices, a solicitor) and Robert Hazen, her "esteemed friends," but her "beloved mother, Mrs. Rebecca Ritchie." Martha Ann Telfer's maiden name had in fact been Ritchie, and this confirmed the statement made years ago by Agnes (Douglas) Bushby.

It is hoped that the will of Rebecca Ritchie will be obtained some day and, especially, that the references to Barbados may lead to more knowledge of the Ritchie family. Nothing was found in the Public Record Office's Barbados records; efforts are now being made in Barbados. Wills of Minto Telfer, filed 11 June 1845, and of William Telfer, filed 12 May 1821, have been identified in the Probate Register Record Book in Georgetown, but so far have not been located. They should shed some light on the Telfer family, as should the will of Richard Telfer, who died in 1825 and whose link with Rebecca Ritchie was the key to finding Martha Ann. He may have been James Douglas' stepfather, but until further information can be obtained this cannot be substantiated. As is well known, marriage and birth records for the period in the area are not available.

It would naturally be very interesting to clarify the status of "Rebecca Ritchie, a free coloured woman." No other Rebecca Ritchie was found mentioned in the many newspapers searched, but that does not prove that the Rebecca Ritchie who was James Douglas' grandmother was "a free coloured woman." If she were, the term would suggest a woman of part negro blood — whether mulatto, quadroon, octoroon [mustee], or musteefino, may never be established.<sup>15</sup> The usual reason for manumission was the desire of a white man to have his children, sometimes also their

<sup>15</sup> The following explanation by a recognized expert in the history of the West Indies is the most complete found: "Varying amounts of Caucasian blood resulted in gradations of color on which a semi-caste system was created. The offspring of a white man and a negro woman was known as a mulatto; the cross between a white and a mulatto, a quadroon; that between a white and a quadroon, a mustee [this would appear to correspond to octoroon]; while the union of white and mustee produced musteefinos. These distinctions were jealously guarded; the farther from negro ancestry an individual stood the higher his social rank. Those above three steps removed from the full black in lineal digression were officially deemed to be white; all below it were mulattos, so-called 'persons of color,' in the eyes of the law." Lowell Joseph Ragatz, *The Fall of the Planter Class in the British Caribbean, 1763-1833 — A Study in Social and Economic History* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1963), p. 33. The expression "coloured" is still used in Guyana "to denote a person of mixed race, e.g., mulatto." Letter to writer, 2 October 1979, from Cameron and Shepherd, Solicitors of Georgetown. One of the members of this firm is Secretary of the Law Society of Guyana.

mother, freed from the burden of slavery,<sup>16</sup> though freedom may have been the automatic — and obviously much desired — result of inter-marriage of coloured and white for four generations.<sup>17</sup> Since slaves were first brought to Barbados in 1627<sup>18</sup> and to Guyana around 1672, if not as early as 1613,<sup>19</sup> it will probably be impossible to trace much further Douglas' parentage on the West Indian side.

Another mystery to unravel is whether James Douglas himself was indeed a native of Demerara. There is now the Barbados connection to investigate, though his father's interests in Demerara still strongly suggest "an attachment" in that colony.

As for Rebecca Ritchie, whose estate was being settled in the late 1860s, although she had died more than a decade earlier, there is plenty of evidence, provided the Rebecca Ritchie mentioned in the newspapers was Martha Ann Telfer's mother, that she lived out the rest of her life in Demerara. If this is so, the Rebecca Ritchie whose estate was the subject of correspondence between James Douglas and James Stuart must have lived to a great age. Since James was 52 in 1855, his grandmother must have been at least in her late eighties or early nineties. All that is known at the moment is that she was dead by February 1855, when James Stuart wrote to James Douglas about the estate.

There is no explanation so far for the delay in settling the estate. Some of the assets were still not sold by 19 January 1867, for on that day, in *The Colonist*<sup>20</sup> of Georgetown, a notice appeared regarding a sale of property in North Cumingsburg District, an area of Georgetown. This had been "lately the Property of the Heirs of Rebecca Ritchie" and was

<sup>16</sup> Ragatz, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34. Freedmen were a very small group. In Barbados they were estimated at 1.1 percent of the population in the late eighteenth century, 2.7 in 1800 and 6.3 in 1834, the year slavery was abolished in the West Indies. Jerome S. Handler and Frederick W. Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados — An Archaeological and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 295. However, as has been pointed out in note 9 above, the proportion was a shade higher in Demerara, being 8.07 percent in 1838.

<sup>17</sup> Ragatz, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15. For the African origins of the slaves, see pp. 20-29.

<sup>19</sup> The first recorded shipment of slaves — by the Dutch — was in 1672 (to Esquibo, then Esquebo). William Lux, *Historical Dictionary of the British Caribbean* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975), p. 115. However, the Dutch, the first effective occupiers of what is now Guyana, built a fort there between 1613 and 1616. Alan H. Adamson, *Sugar Without Slaves* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 19. There is every reason to believe there were slaves there as in other Dutch installations.

<sup>20</sup> C 554, British Museum (now British Library) Newspaper Library, Colindale, hereafter Colindale.

then the "absolute property of Mayor & Town Council of Georgetown," indicating that the property had been taken over by the municipality and, most probably also, that no direct heirs were available locally in 1867. This agrees with what is known of James Douglas' West Indian relatives, namely that his sister Cecilia (Cowan) Cameron was already dead — she died in 1859 in Victoria — and with the supposition that his brother, Alexander, who had joined the fur trade with him but had been found unsuitable, had either died or disappeared without trace. There is no knowledge of Rebecca Ritchie having had children other than Martha Ann, although the distribution of the estate — \$500 only being left to Douglas' daughters — does suggest otherwise.<sup>21</sup> The property<sup>22</sup> was to be sold for \$10,000<sup>23</sup> and the money was to be "held for two weeks until all claims possible [were] filed." Checks in the Georgetown newspapers did not disclose the date of Rebecca Ritchie's death, but this may have been due to the fact that lists such as appeared when Martha Ann Telfer died in 1839 were less frequently given as time went on in this or other newspapers of the colony available in England.

The value indicates a sizeable property. Though it is extremely difficult to make even an approximate comparison of its value — much less present-day value — some indication can be obtained from the fact that the total value of the 4,065 houses in Georgetown in the early 1850s (a period of economic stagnation) was \$2,701,123, making an average house worth \$664.50.<sup>24</sup> Further, the following prices for staple foods in the 1860s may be of interest: salt cod, 6 cents a pound; plantains, 44 cents a bunch; Creole beef, 20 cents a pound.<sup>25</sup>

On June 3 an auction sale of buildings was ordered by the Mayor and Town Council of Georgetown. Two small buildings were listed as "lately the Property of the Heirs of Ritchie." It is not clear from the description

<sup>21</sup> It is obvious from Douglas' letter to Stuart of 28 November 1868 that David Cameron, his late sister Cecilia's husband, had also heard from James Stuart and had been in touch with Douglas. It is reasonable to assume that part of the estate went to Cecilia's two daughters: Cecile (Cecilia) Eliza Cowan, now Mrs. A. G. Young, and Edith Rebecca Cameron, now Mrs. H. M. Doughty.

<sup>22</sup> "South  $\frac{1}{2}$  Lots 4 and 5, with all the buildings and erections thereon in North Cumingsburg District."

<sup>23</sup> Dollars as well as sterling (introduced in 1825) and guilders were in use. In the 1850s the relative values were: 1 dollar, 3 guilders or 4s.4d. Dalton, *op. cit.*, I, p. 368 and II, p. 62. I have found no indication that the ratio had much changed by the late 1860s. The dollars were either Spanish or Mexican, more likely Spanish by the 1860s as the Mexican dollar was being gradually withdrawn.

<sup>24</sup> Dalton, *op. cit.*, II, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Adamson, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

whether or not they were part of the property offered for sale in February, but if not they were adjacent.<sup>26</sup>

The evidence, though not conclusive, that this Rebecca Ritchie was Martha Ann's mother and James Douglas' grandmother is very strong indeed, for Martha Ann Telfer also lived in Cumingsburg at the time of her death, as is evident from the notices of sale of her chattels. She obviously owned real estate there, as is shown in a list of unpaid taxes for 1838-1839 where the name Ann Telfer appears in connection with the "North Half of lot 277" in North Cumingsburg. This property is not the same as that sold in 1867.<sup>27</sup> Cumingsburg, presumably the district adjacent to North Cumingsburg, seems to have been a pleasant area if the description of a property which Mrs. Rebecca Ritchie sold in 1840 is any indication. This particular property on the west side of the High Street was "next to the Residence of Dr. Blair," the Colonial Surgeon General,<sup>28</sup> and was described as a "nice house on a large lot."<sup>29</sup>

Probably, therefore, it was in the Cumingsburg area of Georgetown that James Douglas' mother and grandmother lived, and probably he too spent his Demerara years there. His mother's family seems to have achieved some measure of social standing and comfort. Whether this was due to the munificence of the Douglasses has yet to be proved, but at last the two shadowy figures of James Douglas' very early childhood are beginning to emerge from obscurity.

<sup>26</sup> "A Small Building on the Western Front of Lot 4 and a Small Building on the Western Front of South Half of Lot 4." *The Colonist*, C 554, Colindale.

<sup>27</sup> *Royal Gazette*, 21 July 1840. CO 115/5, P.R.O. Only the name Ann is given, but Telfer was not a common name.

<sup>28</sup> Dalton, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> Lot 46. Advertised March 19 and sold (to Silvia Locket) by 17 October 1840 when the "Transport" (conveyance) was listed in the *Royal Gazette*, CO 115/5, P.R.O.