

Letter by Alexander Baillie of Dochfour, Isle of Nevis, to Alexander Baillie of Dunain, 1752

(GB0232/D456/A/1/28)

Dear Sir,

I would have troubled you with a letter in November last when I wrote my mother, but my being a stranger in these parts & a little dejected by the gloomy appearance fortune saluted me with on my first outset in the world putt it out of my power to say anything to the purpose; I have since that time kept on foot notwithstanding of an epidemick fever that raged round the islands about Christmas & snatcht off numbers of the Natives as well as Europeans; This came to compleat their distress after a violent hurricane they had in September, that rooted up almost all their sugar canes, beatt flatt their houses (being all made of boards) & drove ashore in Antigua, Montserrat, St Christopher & this island above seventy saill of merchantmen & a great many more in Jamaica, besides severall small craft that were sunk in the different wads before they could unmoor & make out to sea. But these evils are common once a year, for which reason no ships stay or come here in Septer or October but last year the hurricane came sooner than usuall & the ships were longa loading by reason of a very indifferent sugar cropt.

The heatt of the climate was on my first arrivall very uneasy & disagreeable, but custom & the loss of some Scotch beef makes it now more tollerable. Besides, when I see so many of my poor countrymen (who come abroad with very laudable intentions & may be truly said to earn their bread with the sweat of their brows) toiling and fatiguing in the field exposed to the excessive heatt of the sun from morning till evening after a parcell of Negroes I find it a very difficult matter to make both ends of the year meet. It gives me comfort to think that my lott is at least as good as thousands of theirs and that by pains & industry something may in time be made of it, tho' I really believe several make it now as easily & with less anxiety & disappointments in more northern climates and that entirely owing to the great numbers that from all nations resort hither, from a very mistaken notion indeed that gold may be got for the gathering of it. There is no people more deceived in this respect than the Scots who flock to the foreign settlements in numbers every year, and I'm very sorry to say that I have hitherto seen few of them in a capacity to return. Nor really do such as are seem to incline it much, for as they commonly come abroad young & before they are well able to judge for themselves, these countrys grow naturally dear to them with their age, for they are remarkable for their spirit & resolution in all the vicissitudes of fortune. An instance of this I had occasion to see last week, being at St Christophers and in company with a young gentleman from Dumfries, who after complaining bitterly of his ill luck since he came here told me he designed immediatly for Jamaica, What?, says I, for that curs'd place that has been the grave of so many of our countrymen? He answer'd that he knew very well it was

the grave of nineteen in twenty of such of them as went there, but as there was no encouragement for young people here & that he had done his best to no purpose for some time already, he would cheerfully run the risk of twenty to one for a fortune rather than go home a beggar with a life in that condition not worth the keeping. I very readily came in to his sentiments which I thought very noble and we wished each other well after he had once & again repeated these lines of Virgil.

“Nos patriae fines & dulcia linquimus arva
 Nos patriam fugimus tu Tytre lentus in umbra
 Formosam resonare doces amaryllida silvis” [*]

You'll expect that before I finish my letter, I shall say something of the ladies, being full of making my fortune that way before I left Scotland. Well then, you must know that I have not yet had the pleasure of seeing many whose charms made any incurable impressions on my heart; I don't know whither it is owing to the disagreeableness of being restricted to one continually bedfellow in these hotter climates & almost suffocated with the effluvia of tobacco, or to their fortunes not answering expectations, but I protest the Negro wenches are much handsomer & cleaner in my eyes in all respects & for all the purposes you please, and I'm sorry to observe that in all appearance the married men think so too for (to their honour be it spoken) there is not one in forty of them but keeps one or more of them in chintz & calicoes out of the field, and for what purpose I leave you to judge.

I hope you'll excuse the length of this [uncon.....sody] & favour me with a line acquainting me of the [.....] my concerns since I saw you & all the news of the country. You'll please give your letter to my uncle Evan as he has a direction for me; and with my sincerest & best wishes to Lady Dunzean, Lady Campbell, yourself & your family. I am,

Dear Sir,

Your Affectionate cousin & servant

Alex. Baillie

Nevis, 18th March 1752

[*] [Round the wide world in banishment we roam
 Forced from our pleasing fields and native home
 Beneath the shade, which beechen boughs diffuse,
 You, Tityrus, entertain your sylvan muse"] – John Dryden translation