

SUGAR  
IN THE  
BLOOD



ANDREA STUART

A FAMILY'S STORY OF  
SLAVERY AND EMPIRE

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# *Sugar in the Blood*



A FAMILY'S STORY OF SLAVERY AND EMPIRE

*Andrea Stuart*



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For my uncle, Trevor Ashby,

whose stories started it all

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*The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past.*

—WILLIAM FAULKNER

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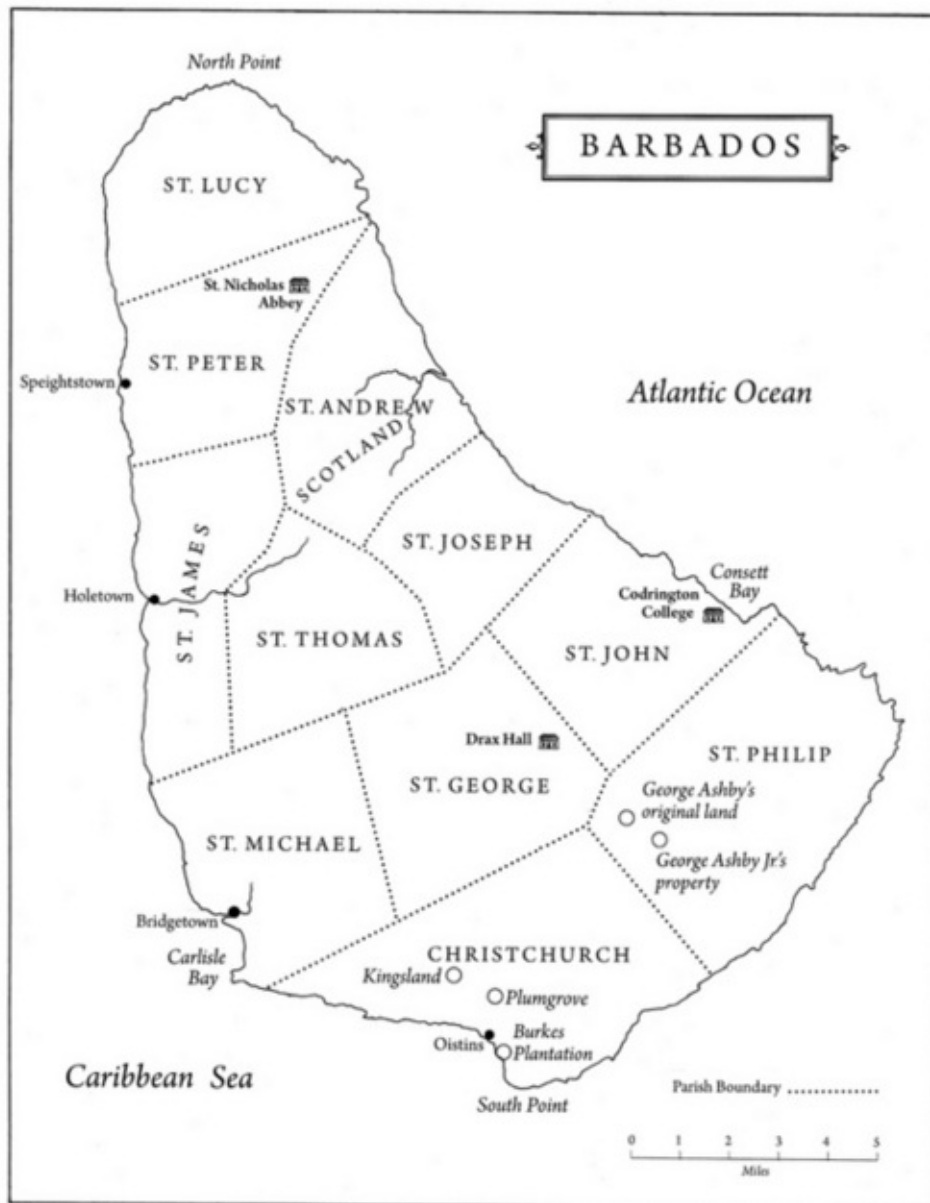
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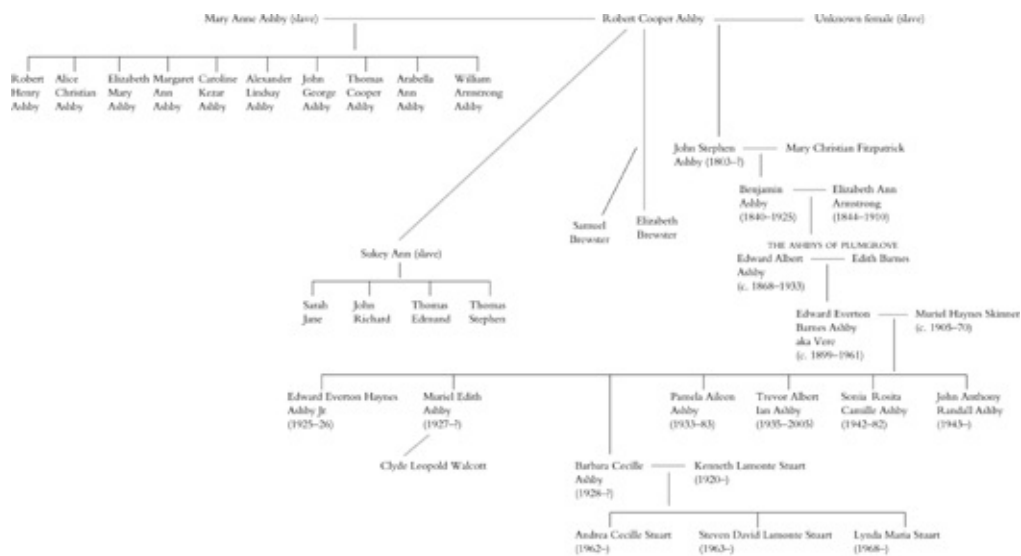
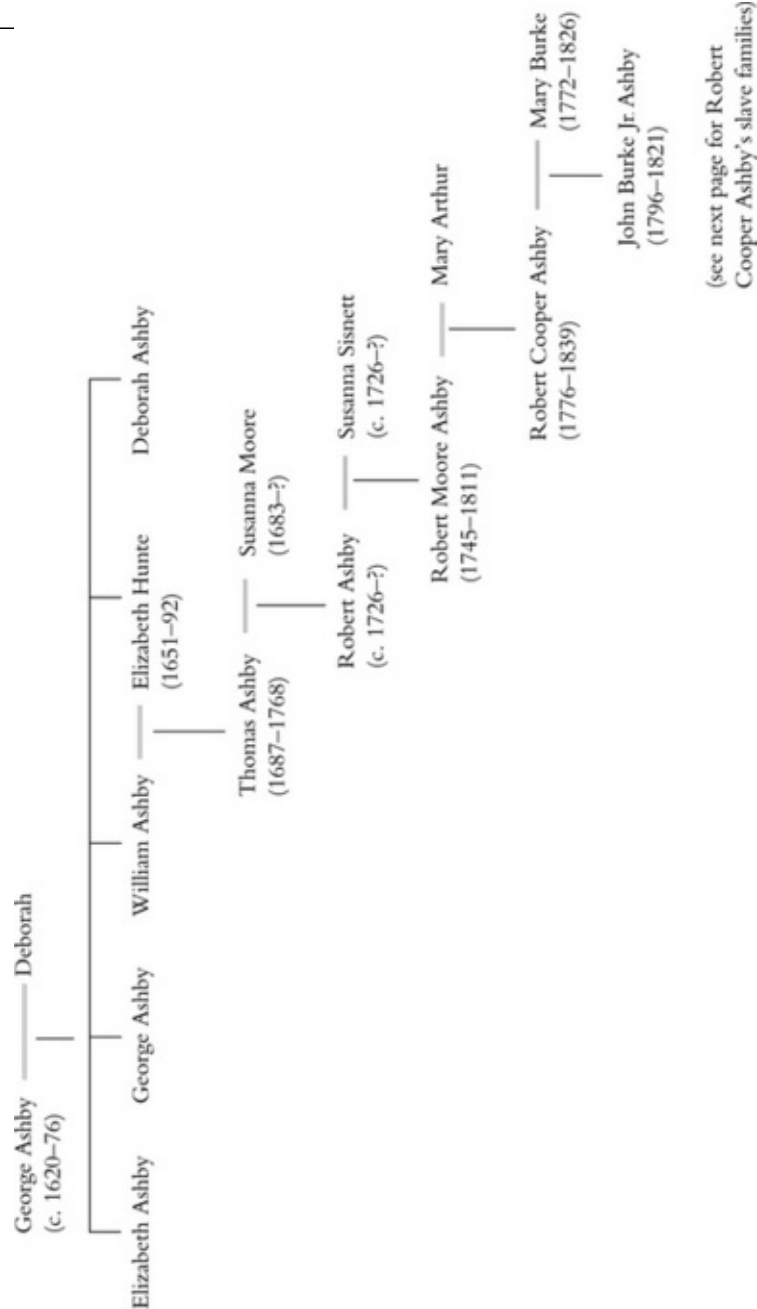
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THE ASHBY FAMILY

Mary Anne Ashby (slave)

Robert Henry Ashby   Alice Christian Ashby   Elizabeth Mary Ashby   Margaret Ann Ashby   Caroline Kezar Ashby   Alexander Lindsay Ashby   John George Ashby   Thomas Cooper Ashby   Arabella Ann Ashby   William Armstrong Ashby

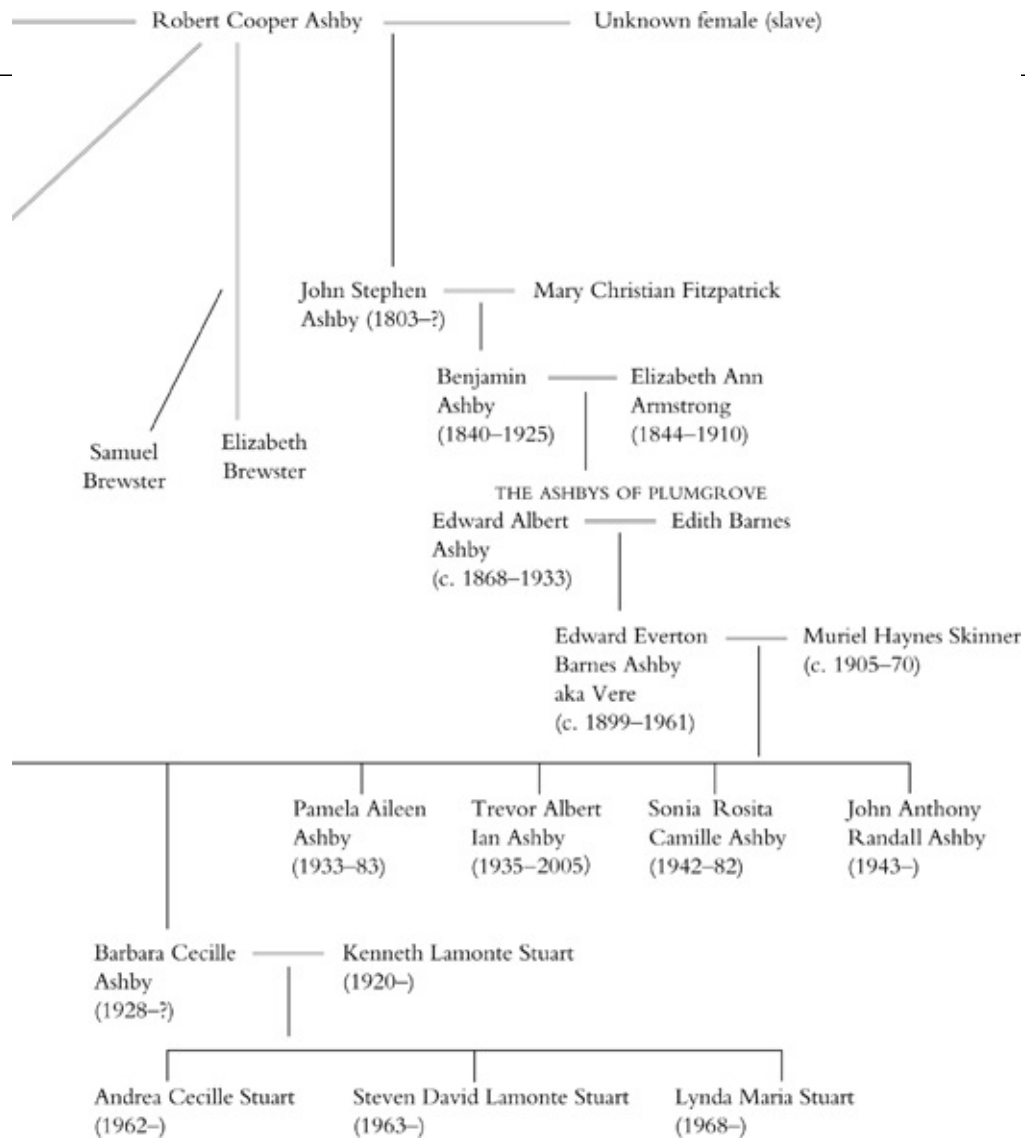
Sukey Ann (slave)

Sarah Jane   John Richard   Thomas Edmund   Thomas Stephen

Edward Everton Haynes Ashby Jr. (1925-26)   Muriel Edith Ashby (1927-?)

Clyde Leopold Walcott

THE ASHBY FAMILY



# Preface

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My family is just one of millions across the globe that were forged by sugar and slavery. And so my chronicle has echoes across the Americas as far away as Australia and the Indian Ocean. Virtually all our stories began the same way: some English or European migrants abandoned the Old World for the New, eventually to become enriched by the production of sugar, which became known as “white gold.” During this process, their bloodlines inevitably became intermingled with that of the slaves imported to farm and service this new economy. Yet, despite the ubiquity of this tale, I could not recollect a non-fiction book that tried to tell it; one which explored how the epic forces of sugar, slavery and settlement made and shaped the life experiences of our ancestors, and our world today. So I have written that book myself.

The narrative of the book is organized around the particular genealogy of the Ashby family on my maternal ancestors. It begins with my first identifiable ancestor and continues to the present day. This approach caused me some heartache, since it has meant focusing the initial section of the story largely around its white progenitors, whose experience is definitively documented. That doesn't feel comfortable, but it allows a more representative story to be told, since the Caribbean was a European world in the early years of settlement, with black people in the minority for several decades. And this methodology also demonstrates a fundamental truth about the region's families, which overwhelmingly started as ethnically white and over time became predominantly black.

So, historical veracity triumphed. But that has meant that my African ancestors do not enter the picture until they are confirmed on the family tree. The unknowability of their past is one of the many terrible by-products of slavery, when people, reduced to chattels, are written out of history and deprived of a personal past. Ghosts haunt this tale, small men whose lives leave only very faint footprints and slaves whose sufferings leave no mark at all. My debt of honour has been to try to reconstruct their stories, black and white, and bring them to vivid life, using the scraps and fragments of information available to me. In doing so I have been very aware of the tensions between helping stories to be told without abusing the limitations of historical record, and allowing myself to interpret and comment while acknowledging the silences of the undocumented past.

The completion of *Sugar in the Blood* would not have been possible without the support and encouragement of a great number of people. My first debt is to my editor, Laura Barber, whose passion for the book, unfailing encouragement and editorial prowess have made this the book it is; and then to everyone else at Portobello for producing and publicizing it with such enthusiasm and energy. In America I am grateful to Sonny Mehta's team at Knopf, with a special mention to Diana Coglianese, for taking this project to their hearts and backing it unequivocally. My wonderful agent, Clare Alexander, “got” this project immediately and went in to bat for it with panache and passion. My profound gratitude also goes to the Wingate Foundation, without whose financial support this book could not have been written.

My research has taken me on interesting journeys. In Barbados, where much of my primary research was undertaken, I was met with great kindness. My dear friend Alissandra Cummin

director of the Barbados Museum, has been invaluable: introducing me to the right people, tracking down useful sources, recommending useful texts. Huge thanks are due to Robert Morris and my newly discovered cousin John Knox, who have guided me through the maze of Ashby-related sources, and whose unstinting generosity with their research, time and superior local knowledge have been invaluable. Thanks are also due to Sir Hilary Beckles, Dr. Pedro Welch, Dr. Karl Watson and Dr. Tara Iniss, who in different ways have contributed to the project. Cynthia Cummerbatch and Patricia Stafford both shared their precious work with me. The library staff at the Barbados Museum and the Barbados Archives were always patient and helpful. In England I particularly wish to thank Bill Schwarz at Queen Mary, University of London, for his vital input in thinking through the research process. Staff at the London Library were always willing to help me source material, and I would like to thank the Athenaeum for granting access to their collection of pamphlets on the slave trade.

My special gratitude goes to Tara Kaufmann, who has walked the entire way with me, helping with research and reading and editing sections; and to my daughters Ava and Georgina whose cries of “Is it finished yet?” have spurred me to the finishing line. My siblings, Lynn and Steven, have been unstinting in their support, while my parents, Kenneth and Barbara Stuart, have been wonderful in every way: finding material, reading samples and providing feedback. My wider family—especially my uncle John and aunts Muriel and Dottie—have provided me with pictures and other family material. And, to end, I offer a special salute to all the new relatives whom I have uncovered in researching this book, especially Andrew Ramsey, Diana Miller and Robert Wulf. To them and all the other Ashbys I have spoken to or heard about, from Australia to America, Canada to Trinidad, France to Holland, this book belongs to you.

# Introduction

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In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future.

—ALEX HALEY

I HAPPENED UPON the name of my earliest known ancestor while sitting in a brutally air-conditioned library at the Barbados Museum, poring over a seventeenth-century census. There he was: George Ashby, my maternal grandfather eight times removed. I knew how unusual it was for family research to reach back that far and I felt utterly exhilarated: my stomach lurched and my eyes filled with tears. This sense of elation lingered for a long time and my previously vague interest in genealogy suddenly sharpened. I decided to find out more.

The journey that followed wasn't always joyful. There were unpleasant shocks as well as happy surprises, perhaps the most painful being the discovery of one of my ancestors on a slave return (a register of slaves held on an individual plantation): just another commodity listed like pigs and cows and farm machinery. My sorrow and fury were tempered only by my gratitude that I had found him, as if somehow he could draw comfort—as I did—from having his life noticed and honoured by a free descendant.

Eventually I built up an unbroken family tree reaching back to 1620. I was initially triumphant, but as time went on a sense of anticlimax overwhelmed me. What did my neat, formatted family tree really mean? It was, after all, just names on a page. Genealogical research has its limitations: it yields the skeleton, not the body. But between the bones I had nonetheless glimpsed something intriguing: a story of migration, settlement, survival, slavery and the making of the Atlantic world. I realized that there was a book here, struggling to emerge. I continued investigating, but now focusing on secondary sources that brought to life the context and detail of the period. Over time, my maternal line began to gain both shape and colour. I followed George Ashby from seventeenth-century England, where he, alongside thousands of others, turned his back on his homeland and migrated to the Caribbean island of Barbados in search of a new life. I tracked the lives of his descendants as they became enmeshed in the sugar industry and the Atlantic slave system. And I followed the offspring of those descendants, myself included, as they migrated back to the cold winters of England, the U.S. and Canada.

Although this book is not about me, the story is of course my own. It forced me to revisit my own Caribbean childhood: the holidays spent at the family plantation, Plumgrove, where we could look out of the bedroom windows and watch the fields of waving sugar cane being harvested by other, poorer Barbadians. At the time, I had no idea how privileged this life was; that understanding came later, after I had grown up and made my home in England and had come to see that the cane fields in which I played had once been drenched in exploitation, grief and death. And I had recognized something else: that my family's story was at once very specific, very particular, but also wholly typical and representative. It is a story

that belongs not just to me but to many, many others.

My family, like the families of those others, is the product of sugar and of its sibling settlement and slavery. This book is the story of how those forces shaped the minutiae of the Ashby family's intimate relationships—and how, in turn, those family relationships ripple outwards, transforming the societies in which they lived. It is, then, more than a family history: it is a global story, too—one that fixes its gaze on the connections between continents, between black and white, men and women, the free and the enslaved—demonstrating that the individual is not just a victim of global history, but an author of it as well.





# *The Pioneer*

There was a wind over England, and it blew.  
 (Have you heard the news of Virginia?)  
 A west wind blowing, the wind of a western star,  
 To gather men's lives like pollen and cast them forth,  
 Blowing in hedge and highway and seaport town,  
 Whirling dead leaf and living but always blowing,  
 A salt wind, a sea wind, a wind from the world's end,  
 From the coasts that have new wild names, from the huge unknown.

—STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT, “WESTERN STAR”

GEORGE ASHBY'S STORY began as all migrants' stories do: with a journey.

Some time in the late 1630s, when George Ashby was finally given notification that his ship was ready to sail, he must have been afraid. He was a blacksmith, a young man in his late teens, about to leave behind everything he had ever known. Though the voyage carried the seeds of his dreams he, like most of the population, had probably never undergone a long sea journey before and had no real idea of what to expect when he arrived in the Americas.

Those who chose to undertake the fearsome Atlantic crossing in search of a new life were generally tough—or else dangerously foolish. But what else can we know about George Ashby, my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather? Was he fleeing from his family or seeking a new one? Did he dream of religious freedom or of wealth? Was he ambivalent about leaving his homeland or were his life experiences so bitter that he believed nothing in the Americas could be worse? As he set sail for the adventuresome world of the Caribbean he would have had no idea how heavily the odds were stacked against him. (According to one historian, men like him were “pursuing a will-o’-the-wisp,” since very few of them ever achieved the better life they longed for.) He could not know that he would be one of the lucky ones: that he would not just survive but found a dynasty that endures to this day, built on sugar and forged by slavery.

The first sight of the ship would have done nothing to allay his trepidation. The typical merchant vessel that plied the route between the Caribbean and Britain was rated at around 200 tons (meaning that it could accommodate 200 casks or tuns of wine). Trussed against the stone walls of the dock, the ship looked like a gigantic gutted carcass afloat upon the water. The gaunt ribs of the wooden hull curved menacingly into the sky and the base was coated with a shaggy pelt of seaweed and barnacles. It would have been hard for George to countenance that he would be confined in the belly of this behemoth for almost two months with the real possibility that his journey would end, like that of so many before him,

massacre by pirates or drowning at sea.

After unpacking and settling in, the passengers were summoned on deck to present the documents to the “searchers.” These officials administered the oath of allegiance to the king, stamped each traveller’s ticket with the crucial “Licences under their hands and seals to pass the seas,” and then cleared the vessel for departure. Since every passenger had to undergo this process, no matter what their individual circumstances or where they came from, represented their first rite of passage, one that made their new status as migrants starkly real.

Still gathered on the bridge, the passengers chatted among themselves or waved to family and friends gathered portside to wish them bon voyage. Then, all of a sudden, a flurry of activity: the sailors scrambling across the deck, busying themselves with a series of tasks that were inexplicable to most of the passengers, the screeching of the anchor as it was winched aboard, the screaming of the hoisted sails, the shouting of the master and the sailors, all combined in a violent auditory assault. As the crew worked furiously in the bows, stern and dock, the passengers jostled to be as near the rails as possible.

Despite the noise and bustle of the ship, most of the migrants would have been as hushed as worshippers in a church, fearful of what the voyage might hold or trying to imagine what lay at the other end. They were aware that the journey was, in all probability, final. Some may have dreamt of returning to their homeland enriched, perhaps even ennobled, but most rightly sensed that they would not be coming back.

To truly grasp what this sea journey meant, what bravery and audacity it required, one must understand how the world was seen and known at that time. Though George Ashby and his contemporaries had been born in the Age of Discovery (1500–1700), most of the world was still *terra incognita* for Europeans. Maps were often sketchy and inaccurate. Two continents, Australia and Antarctica, had not been traced at all, and vast areas were still blank. The interiors of South America, Africa and Asia had scarcely been explored. Beyond the eastern fringe of North America, which George’s fellow pioneers had begun to document, were millions of square miles of uncharted wilderness.

Like many other countries in the Old World, England was poised between the medieval and the modern, where most people’s lives played out within a narrow radius around their birthplace, and their beliefs were characterized by superstition and ignorance. It was an age in which magic still played a large part in the lives of ordinary people and many firmly believed in witches and fairies, that butterflies were the souls of the dearly departed, and that churchyards swarmed with souls and spirits. In the absence of real information about far-off lands, fantasies abounded: that the east was populated with dog-headed men and basilisks, that Africa had tribes with no heads at all—just eyes and mouths in their breasts—and that the Caribbean was peopled by cannibals, amazons and giants. Some believed that the oceans were full of strange creatures such as mermaids and sea dragons. In 1583 Sir Henry Gilbert professed to have encountered a lion-like sea monster on his return from claiming St. John’s Newfoundland, for England. In a world that was as yet so immeasurable, frightening and inexplicable, George and his fellow travellers must have feared that they were not just crossing the map, but falling off the edge of it.

Yet by the seventeenth century, many thousands of Britons, beguiled by the much-vaunted possibilities of the “New World” (which they saw as a tabula rasa on which they could write

despite the long history and complex cultures long implanted there), were willing to take the leap into the unknown, and left their homeland to start a fresh life in the Americas. The migration had begun as a trickle in 1607 with the settling of Jamestown, the first permanent colony in what is now the United States. It had increased to a recognizable stream by 1620 and became a veritable flood in the 1640s, when over 100,000 people left a country with a population of just under five million. (Between 1600 and 1700 over 700,000 people emigrated from England, about 17 per cent of the English population in 1600.) At the rate of one ship departing from England every day, these pioneers arrived to “settle the Americas” fanning out from Newfoundland for three thousand miles, via Virginia and the Caribbean, to Guiana on the South American mainland. All the way they fought, worked and died to establish themselves in new and terrifying lands.

The English weren't the only nation on the move. The Spanish were the pioneers of the colonization of the Americas, and the Portuguese, French and Dutch swiftly became essential players in the region. But just over a century after Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World (which the historian Germán Arciniegas described as being “so momentous a development in human history that it was like the passing from the third to the fourth day of the first chapter of Genesis”), it was the small nation of England that emerged as Europe's greatest colonizing power. This was particularly surprising for a people who were “wedded to their native Soile like a Snail to his shell.” What motivated these patriotic and insular people to abandon the world as they knew it and move halfway across the globe?

The why of George Ashby's departure is something I will never know; my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was most likely typical of the men who settled much of the New World, a man of action, not reflection, who did not take time out to write letters or keep journals; nor was he important enough for others to write about him. But certainly some of the wider reasons that stirred migrants to risk the New World would have applied to him. Historians have summarized Europe's motivation for the conquest of the Americas with the pithy phrase “God, gold and glory.” This formula is slightly reductive—and certainly doesn't allow for the large number of migrants who had no say in their transfer—but it does convey the positive pull of the opportunities represented by the New World.

It was not only the much-persecuted Puritans who went to settle New England for whom God was important. The vast majority of those who migrated to colonies south of Maryland were what the historian Carl Bridenbaugh has dubbed “non-separating puritans.” They may not have moved together as a religious community led by a minister, but they did share the Puritans' profound unease with the old ways of worship and were questioning of the ancient ceremonial doctrines of the established church. They too had looked on at the risible spectacle of “the typical Sunday service in England, where parishioners stared dumbly at a minister mumbling incomprehensible phrases from the Book of Common Prayer” and recognized “how far most people were from a true engagement with the word of God.” So while they had not been impassioned enough to make their faith the prime motivation for their migration, their religious leanings meant that they were that bit more likely to be disillusioned—and therefore to contemplate migration—than their fellow Englishmen.

The Bible was, in fact, a potent recruiter for colonization. In an age where the scriptures permeated everyday life, there were numerous passages that would have resonated with

those tempted by the “Western Star.” Great orators such as the Anglican priest Robert Gray or John Donne, the Dean of St. Paul’s, or the Puritan preachers Thomas Hooker and John Cotton thundered from Genesis: “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation,” or from II Samuel 7:10: “I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more: neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime.”

The dream of building a City on the Hill for the perfection of the human spirit, so inspirational to the Puritans, was also an attractive one for many other migrants, as was the entire project of spreading the word. Captain John Smith, the era’s most famous adventurer-turned planter, declared:

If hee have any graine of faith or zeale in Religion, what can he doe less hurtfull to any, or more agreeable to God, then to seeke to convert those poore Savages to know Christ and humanity, whose labours with discretion will triple requite thy charge and paine; what so truly sutes with honour and honesty, as the discovering things unknowne, erecting Townes, peopling Countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things unjust, teaching vertue and gaine to our native mother Country a Kingdome to attend her.

But rhetoric about taking Christianity and civilization to the heathen (so lavishly exploited by the Spanish conquistadors), or giving European creativity and imagination space to grow, was a smokescreen for the economic imperatives that drove the majority of migrants. They hungered for gold; or at least the chance to acquire land, their own little piece of paradise.

Most seventeenth-century English émigrés were in flight from terrible poverty. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, rapid population growth and periodic agricultural depression, culminating in a series of terrible famines, caused genuine hardship. In the countryside large numbers of people had been deprived of their ancient rural security. The lack of land to cultivate frustrated many, while unemployment threatened agricultural labourers as well as village artisans. The rise in the cost of living and the simultaneous fall in the value of wages meant that many people were surviving on the very margins of existence. Housing was inadequate at best; in cold or wet weather fuel was scarce and expensive. Health scares were frequent, with regular outbreaks of tuberculosis and plague. Effective medical treatment was almost non-existent and so the mortality rate—already high—rose even higher.

Resentment against these conditions focused and crystallized on a lavish, self-indulgent monarch: Charles I. His resistance to parliamentary challenge meant that, from 1629, the people had been governed by arbitrary monarchical rule. His decision to levy various taxes to obtain revenue and his exploitation of press-gangs who forced unwilling souls into the navy meant greater financial strain for his already beleaguered subjects and generated a real sense of bitterness. (“Thus was the king’s coffers filled with oppression,” concluded one pamphlet in 1649.) His popularity was eroded further by his religious affiliations: not only had he displayed a preference for the High Anglican worship that would so alienate the Puritans and others of that ilk, he had also married a Catholic queen, Henrietta Maria, and allowed her to observe her faith publicly.

The wider political situation also contributed to the depressed mood of the country and the general suffering endured during this period. The Thirty Years War (1618–48), which had seen warring Protestant and Catholic forces reduce much of Europe to a corpse-strewn

battleground, further depleted the nation and contributed to profound collective dissatisfaction with the status quo. The decades from the 1630s through to the end of the 1650s were, according to the historian Peter Bowden, “probably amongst the most terrible years through which the country had ever passed.” He goes on: “It is probably no coincidence that the first real beginnings of the colonisation of America dated from this period.” Facing poverty, hunger and actual starvation at home, the populace were more than usually attentive to the pedlars of tales told in taverns of the lands across the sea, where everyone could have a full belly and their own property.

One such economic migrant was Richard Ligon. A cultured, educated gentleman of “above sixty years” who had served at Charles I’s court, he sailed for Barbados in 1647. Ligon was untypical of most migrants to the Caribbean by virtue of his age and class. But his reasons for migrating—essentially economic—would have resonated with most of his contemporaries. Though in the “last scene of my life,” he had “lost (by a Barbarous Riot) all I had gotten by the painful travels and cares of my youth ... and left destitute of a subsistence.” In this desperate condition he looked about for friends to support him, found none, and therefore considered himself “a stranger in my own Countrey.” As a result, he “resolv’d to lay on the first opportunity that might convey me to any other part of the World, how far distant soever, rather than abide here.”

But the impetus towards the west was also a romantic one. Though the 1600s were still primarily a “listening age,” England, by virtue of its high literacy rates (over half the males in London could read by 1640), had a great many subjects who were able to disseminate the seductive mythology of the New World. This story, which had been evolving ever since Columbus, was a dream of Shangri-La, a completely inviolate and untouched world. In Richard Eden’s *A Treatyse of the Newe India* (1553), one of the first books about the Americas, the author writes about the new lands, beautiful and rich, where there was much gold and a mountain whose sand sparkled with “pearls and other such riches.” He also talks of “strange new peoples, some antagonistic, some friendly, all essentially rude and barbarous,” “beastly and fierce.” This frightening yet bewitching fiction was heightened in the sixteenth century by the widely read tales of Spanish conquistadors like Antonio de Berrio and the English adventurers Walter Raleigh and John Hawkins, who swashbuckled their way across the “torrid zone” in search of El Dorado. If these heroic quests came to naught, it did not dent the public appetite for images of America as a place where an adventurous man could fulfil his destiny.

From the publication of the *Treatyse* in 1553 until the departure of Newport’s ships for Virginia in 1606, there were literally scores of books published about the New World. In subsequent years Eden’s book was thrice reprinted and was joined by Peter Martyr’s *Decades of the Newe Worlde* (1530), Richard Hakluyt’s seminal *Principal Navigations of the English Nation* (1598–1600) and Samuel Purchas’s *His Pilgrims* (1625). Over time the information in these works was supplemented by first-hand accounts of European voyages to the New World (many of which were published in English) as well as the numerous catalogues of people and fauna that had been generated from journeys that swept from Newfoundland to the Amazon. Maps of the Americas (including the one that Shakespeare refers to in *Twelfth Night*) also enhanced geographical knowledge of the region. The curios that sailors brought home

England were acquired by shopkeepers, who titillated their customers with displays of American treasures, genuine as well as fake. The fascination with the New World was even evident in popular entertainment: the public could now go and see curiosities from the region in the form of artefacts and real humans, such as men dressed as “savages,” at places like London’s annual Bartholomew Fair.

Many great writers of the age depicted the Americas in gendered terms as “a succulent maiden to be seduced, deflowered, and plundered by a virile Europe, which shall bask in her treasures.” John Donne, who was closely connected to many of those in the Virginia Company and at one point planned to go to America as the company’s official recorder, thoroughly eroticized the colonial conquest:

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,  
Before, behind, between, above, below.  
O my America! my new-found-land,  
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man mann’d,  
My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee!

Andrew Marvell’s poem “The Emigrants” celebrated the bravery and fortitude of those who had followed the “Western Star,” while Shakespeare—whose two patrons, the successive Earls of Pembroke, were great colonizers and adventurers—was fascinated by those daring enough to chase the dreams associated with the New World. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he declaimed:

He wondered that your lordship  
Would suffer him to spend his youth at home  
While other men, of slender reputation,  
Put forth their sons to seek preferment out—  
Some to the wars, to try their fortune there,  
Some to discover islands far away.

The message was clear. There was no longer any room for noble endeavours in the Old World; the future lay in places of danger and profit, delight and possibilities—the Americas.

Henry Colt, a young ex-soldier turned gentleman adventurer who arrived in the Caribbean in 1631, was typical of such men. He clearly saw himself and his fellows as the descendants of heroes like Raleigh and Hawkins: “they could not rest” until they too had “done some thinges worthy of ourselves, or dye in the attempt.” These men’s decision to go to the West Indies was not as surprising as it now seems. The Caribbean was, according to the historian Richard Dunn, “the Wild West of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, promising far more in the way of excitement, quick profit and constant peril, than the prosaic settlements along the North American coast.” It was in these “provinces of El Dorado” that the more romantic yarns had been spun, it was here that the gold and pearls could be found, it was here that English pirates made their base, it was here that Hawkins and Raleigh had flirted with glory.

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Migration to the New World was also actively promoted by those who stood to profit from it. The shipping companies that transported people to the west had a vested interest in selling this dream, as did the companies that financed the early settlements across the region. These groups took it upon themselves “to educate the public in the wonders of the New World and the possibilities there for a new and better life.” Many of these promotional tracts played on the sense of disillusion that already existed among ordinary Britons. One, written in 1624 to promote migration to Newfoundland, implored: “Bee not too much in love with that country wherein you were borne ... which bearing you, yet cannot breed you, but seemth and indeed, weary of you.” These tracts were supplemented by excited letters home from the recently departed, as well as sermons, broadsides and ballads. Depictions of the New World tended towards the hyperbolic. One critic described the company, which had disseminated a tract designed to promote Virginia, as “varnishing their owne actions with colourable schemes and Cozzening ballads,” filled with “we know not what imaginarie success of plenty and prosperitie.”

Ordinary people, then, had a vivid—if not entirely accurate—image of the New World that fuelled their dreams of a different and better life. And so they went, hundreds upon hundreds on ships with heroic names like the *Achilles* or the *Alexander* or the *Invincible*. These emigrants were unrepresentative of the population of their various homelands in that they were overwhelmingly young, male and unmarried. While history has highlighted the stories of ambitious adventurers and the privileged second and third sons who made their reputations in the New World, the vast majority were, in fact, ordinary people. As the passenger manifests of the day attest, it is men of modest means who are listed page after page: ropemakers and butchers, masons and farmers. Their numbers were swelled by the streams of involuntary migrants who went to the Americas in chains: indentured servants who were tricked aboard ship by “spirits” (agents paid by the settlement companies to recruit labourers by any means necessary); political prisoners who were exiled as punishment; vagrants and orphans and criminals who had been deposited there like so much rubbish.

Whether travelling by choice or by compulsion, all of these individuals flooding into the New World were part of a historical epic that had consequences its participants could not begin to foresee. Those who survived would become the hub of the British Empire and help Britain to become the dominant world power of the day. Along with their European counterparts, they would enrich the European subcontinent and extend the tentacles of its power virtually across the globe, westernizing the great bulk of humanity, imposing its institutions and beliefs, its languages and cultures across the world. Their collective migration would also precipitate the vast redistribution of life across the globe, most notably the millions of Africans who were forcibly transplanted to the Americas to work as slaves on their plantations. And it would transform the world’s entire ecosystem, destroying numerous species and moving innumerable others, to create a world that would be entirely different from what had been before.

Of my ancestor’s early life in England, I could find no historical trace, but the name Ashby was initially associated with the county of Leicestershire and has now spread throughout the Midlands. It is a combination of the Anglo-Saxon word “*aesc*” (ash tree) and the Danish word “*bye*” (town) and has numerous spellings: Ashby, Ashbee, Ashbey, Ashbye. In an English



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