

Kilts and killing in 18th century Jamaica

◆ In her new novel, PD Lennon bases the plot around the true story of Jamaica's first serial killer, Scot Dr Lewis Hutchinson, who after 12 years on the island was executed in 1773

Even in the darkest moments of life in 18th century Scotland, I doubt if any young man aspired to travel to Jamaica and become a serial killer. Yet, somehow, Dr Lewis Hutchinson became that man.

Finding information about Lewis Hutchinson prior to his leaving Scotland proved a challenge. Where in Scotland he was born remains unknown, but it is believed he left his birthplace in 1760, aged 28. Where he completed medical training is also a mystery. His name does not appear as a student or graduate of Edinburgh University Medical School. Checks of the Edinburgh physicians' database show one James Hutchinson and one John Hutchison. (Note, in some records of his exploits Hutchinson is also referred to as Hutchison). Of course, he could have trained elsewhere. There is always the possibility that he trained nowhere, and never qualified, but was clever enough to convince people otherwise.

After all, a mass murderer would see such an elaborate lie as par for the course, and what better way to avoid suspicion than to pretend to be a doctor – someone sworn to save lives.

Life in 18th century Scotland was



The Old House of Assembly in Spanish Town, Jamaica, main; PD Lennon, above

“**One fact we do know, is that Hutchinson murdered between 40 to 60 people**

hierarchical, with social structures being all important. At the top were aristocrats, shadowed by high earners including merchants, landowners, industrialists and bankers, followed by the middle ranks of ordinary people which made up the bulk of the population, and then the poor. Where to slot Doctor Hutchinson? I picture him as a man of modest funds, determined to improve his finances by any means necessary. Though perfectly acceptable in colonial times,



those means would be unacceptable to 21st century folk. Scotland had a large hand in the triangular trade and many men departed the country in search of fortunes thousands of miles away. The busiest port for ocean going travel in 1760 was Greenock. It is likely from that port that Hutchinson set sail on a voyage that would have taken six to ten weeks, an arduous journey faced by many fellow Scotsmen. Of those aboard, some had plans to return as wealthy men while others were on a pilgrimage to a new life with no thoughts of return. As these voyages were often troubled by disease and death, some pioneers did not survive.

Prior to Dr Hutchinson, the most famous physician and philanthropist to arrive in Jamaica was Sir Hans Sloane of Ulster-Scots heritage, who tended to kings and pirates alike during his 15-month stint. Although Sir Hans died in 1753, his works and deeds make an appearance throughout the story as the characters discuss his effect on the island. When Dr Hutchinson arrived in Jamaica, Spanish Town (also known as St Jago de la Vega) in St Catherine parish, was the capital city. The majority of colonial settlers resided in Spanish Town or in the major towns of Kingston or Port Royal, all locations being to the south of the island. His ship would have docked at Kingston Harbour, but for reasons unknown Hutchinson did not fancy the south coast. He headed to the north coast parish of St Ann, and settled in the tiny, remote district of Pedro. Homesick or wanting to maintain a piece of home, he constructed an unremarkable building he called Edinburgh Castle. Today, parts of the stone walls remain, though it is clear from the moss-covered ruins that this castle had neither the size nor grandeur of any castle, let alone its famous namesake.

Whether Dr Hutchinson tended to any human patients on the island is not recorded in the archives. Having chosen such a desolate location, it is hard to imagine how he contemplated making a living. But, as previously suggested, perhaps he was not a doctor and had no intention of practicing medicine. This was the era of sugar plantations, when the British grew rich from slavery. Following in the footsteps of his compatriots, Dr Hutchinson owned a sugar plantation and a community of enslaved people compelled to work the land. He also ran a cattle farm. Did he have experience of raising cattle in Scotland? Who knows? Records show dispute as to whether Hutchinson purchased the animals he used to start his business, or whether, as aggrieved cattle owners alleged, he stole their stock. A non-violent brush with criminality was identified from this early stage. The violent part of his personality revealed itself later. In a dispute over land, Dr Hutchinson attacked his neighbour Dr Jonathan Hutton, beating him about the head, sending Hutton back to England for a trepanning operation.

I do wonder if Dr Hutchinson fled Scotland to escape being associated with violent crimes such as unsolved murders. The walls were closing in and he needed to put as much ocean between himself and the Scottish law men as possible. And avoid the gallows. Maybe he jumped on the first passenger ship he spotted at Greenock dock and found himself bound for Jamaica. Whether it was the azure blue waters of the Caribbean Sea or the warm temperatures which averaged between 20C to 26C – a far cry from the 5C to 19C he was accustomed to in Scotland – Dr Hutchinson decided that life in the colonial jewel was for him. Of course, another attraction could be the ability to commit murder unchallenged in a remote hideout. One fact we do know, is that Hutchinson murdered between 40 to 60 people during his 12-year residency. I guess you could call him an equal opportunity murderer. Black or white, old or young, men or women, strangers or acquaintances. For Hutchinson, murder was sport and he delighted in winning.

Why he was not apprehended when the killing spree was in its early infancy is unclear. I imagine, back then, few people would have the confidence to accuse a person with the esteemed title of 'Doctor' of committing murder. Fear of ruining their own careers, or placing their lives in peril if the accusation could not be proved, must have tempered their enthusiasm. I actually believe that the officials and judiciary of the day were preoccupied with enforcing slavery, expanding land ownership, and amassing great wealth, rather than searching for missing people. That said, they could have assumed the missing

people were alive and well, living elsewhere on the island. Some officials, charged with law and order, pursued easy targets for arrest for all manner of crimes... the enslaved people. It is believed that favoured slaves were aware of Hutchinson's murders, and forced to help dispose of bodies. Upon the gallows at Spanish Town square in March 1773, the killing spree finally came to an end. At the time of his hanging, Dr Hutchinson had lived in Jamaica for 12 years. After his death a variety of fine clothes and jewellery was discovered in a sink hole on his estate in Pedro. In a fictional account of a real person about whom so little is known, an author can take plenty of liberties. As such, getting into the head of a mysterious historical figure like Dr Lewis Hutchinson was great fun. With an image of a red-headed mad man firmly in mind, I determined his character, motivations, and outlook on life, which I hope lend to entertaining scenes for readers. As unbelievable as it might seem to Scottish citizens today, an 18th century Scottish immigrant is officially known as Jamaica's first serial killer.

The Case of the Mad Doctor by PD Lennon is published by Canelo priced at £9.99 (paperback), on Thursday

