

A Nevis 'Legend' Revisited: the Huggins-Maynard Duel of 1822

A legend surrounds the estate of 'Eden Browne' in the parish of St James Windward on the island of Nevis. It involves a duel between members of the Huggins and Maynard families. The story includes a ghost who is supposed to haunt the abandoned Great House. According to one website the ghost has even been captured on film. Like all good legends the details of the story vary according to which source you read or who tells it. However, the basic ingredients run something like this.



Buildings at the entrance to Eden Browne estate

In 1822 the Huggins family, who owned 'Eden Browne', and the Maynards, who owned a neighbouring estate, were gathering at Eden Browne to celebrate a forthcoming marriage between Julia Huggins and Walter Maynard. Shortly before the wedding a quarrel developed between the best man, Julia's brother John, and the groom. One version has it that the quarrel was over a beautiful 'mulatto' slave girl. In any event a challenge was issued and in the ensuing duel John Huggins was shot dead by Walter Maynard, although another version tells that both men were killed. Not unnaturally Julia Huggins is supposed to have been distraught at having lost her love and her brother and died years later, a grieving spinster at her family home of Mountravers. It is her ghost which is 'seen' haunting Eden Browne. Other versions leave out Julia and have John Huggins as the bridegroom and an un-named bride.

The trouble with such legends is that they take a grain of truth and then get horribly muddled in the telling – and the story is retold endlessly on Nevis, often to enhance the tourism 'product'. In the course of current, independent, research into the lives of the

enslaved people of the Pinney/Huggins estate at Mountravers we have uncovered, in the last couple of years, a number of references to this duel, which present an opportunity for straightening out some, but not all, of the details. It is our hope that other researchers and those who may be holding Huggins or Maynard family papers will be able to clarify other details.

The Nevis Slave Registers show that in 1817 'Eden' (Eden Browne), whose early history was given in the 1999-2000 issue of the *St Kitts and Nevis Visitor*, was owned by, or 'in the lawful possession of', a Mrs Ann Hutton. By 1822 the estate had been bought from Mrs Hutton by the Huggins family and belonged to, or was 'in the lawful possession of', John Huggins.ⁱ The reason for the caution here is that after the duel it turns up in the will of his father Edward Huggins senior. The other relevant detail about John Huggins is that Huggins family trees and wills, copies of which are in the Nevis Historical and Conservation Society (NHCS) archive, show that at the time of the duel in 1822 he was already married to Elizabeth Mary Moreton, thus ruling him out as the *groom*.

Edward Huggins senior is of course well known on Nevis for having been tried and acquitted in doubtful circumstances of various acts of cruelty to his slaves and it is not the intention to revisit those stories yet again. He was clearly the subject of a great deal of ill feeling among some of the resident planters and it is instructive that it was a Maynard who proposed the first motion of censure against Huggins in the island's Assembly in 1810. This was after Huggins had ordered the flogging of slaves from Mountravers in the public market.ⁱⁱ Thus there was a lot of ill will between the Maynards and the Hugginses going back to at least 1810 and probably much earlier.

The legend is unclear about which Walter Maynard was involved in the duel, Walter being a common name in the Maynard family.ⁱⁱⁱ However, the 1822 register shows that New River estate, owned by Walter Maynard (1774 - ?), was sandwiched between John Huggins's 'Eden' and Edward Huggins's own New River estate. His father Walter died in 1804 and left a share of the family plantation called Gingerland to his younger sons William and James; this consisted of three separate pieces of land, Upper, Middle and Lower Gingerland, possibly strung out along what is now Hanley's Road. Walter, the eldest son by now married to Ann Scarborough, was barred from inheriting Gingerland because he was in the process of buying New River from the assignees of the merchant firm of Lane, Son & Fraser. New River was an estate into which his father had already put a considerable sum of money on the promise that he could buy it and into which the son was to put more.

Walter Maynard, the son, also had an unsavoury reputation among estate owners connected with Nevis. Because of this Mrs Ames, one of the absentee owners of Stoney Grove estate and a daughter of John Pinney, turned down an offer from him to buy Stoney Grove in 1831. She had gathered from her contacts that he was 'generally considered cruel towards his treatment of his slaves and that his habit of feeding them amounted to nearly starvation'.^{iv}

The one other key player in the legend is Julia Huggins. The only Julia Huggins to come to light so far is the daughter of John's brother, Peter Thomas Huggins of Mountravers. It is not clear when she was born but various letters from her father suggest that she lived most of her life as a spinster at Mountravers and was buried on June 24 1910 at St Thomas Lowland.^v Had she been the grieving bride in 1822, she would have been at least 104 when she died, maybe even 108. This hardly seems likely, judging by the

sprightly correspondence between her and the Leeward Islands' judge J S Udal in the early 1900s.

It seems that the story of the duel is more prosaic and is rooted in the clan hostilities between the two families. An account of it can be found in a letter written by Peter Thomas Huggins to his friend Charles Pinney on August 1 1822 and, to lay the ghost to rest, it is worth quoting the bulk of it:

'I am sure you must have been shocked on hearing of the melancholy death of my most excellent Brother John by the hand of that ferocious wretch Walter Maynard persecuted as my Father has been by this man and his family by rancorous hatred and the blackest malevolence instigated by no other motive but envy. Yet upon all occasions he has been ready when in need to solicit favors from my Father and to abuse his neighbourly kindness after.

The origin of this lamentable occurrence (was this) Maynard's Blacksmith got a severe injury wch rendered him incapable of any service, Maynard applied to John for the loan of my Father's smith. John did not feel himself authorized to lend the smith without my Father's knowledge and accordingly he wrote to my Father and his answer was do as you like, "but I wish to have nothing to do with him for he has always been hostile to me". However poor John wishing to live on friendly terms lent the smith to work for Maynard at noon every day.

About this time Maynard prosecutes my Father's overseer for purchasing some boards wch he suspected were stolen from him. And as it was in the middle of the crop my Mother sent and requested Mr Maynard not to have judgement called upon this unfortunate fellow before the crop was off as they had no other overseer on the estate and my Father was blind and could not attend to it. His answer to this was by G- he wd put him in goal. My Father thought as he had so little consideration for his convenience he wd not suffer his smith to go every day to Maynard upon wch Maynard wrote him a letter and it was answered in as mild and temperate a way as possible. However a week after Maynard assaulted my Father in Town publicly in the street and challenged him who was blind to fight. John wrote him a letter wch I have requested Christopher Claxton to show you and the result was he sent John a challenge.

Poor John had no alternative left. John's friend used every exertion to avoid going to extremities and after the first fire he endeavoured but in vain to prevent further proceeding. Maynard void of religion or feeling glories from what I can learn in this heartrending transaction which has overwhelmed a whole family with grief.^{vi}

Another detail may be relevant. The memorial tablet in St George Gingerland to various members of the Huggins family states that John Huggins died on June 17 1822. However, a complicated series of letters written by his brother Peter Thomas to Charles Pinney on June 17 and June 26 indicates tentatively that the duel happened on June 15 which in turn suggests that John Huggins lingered a while after being struck down.^{vii} The other point to note is that, according to the letter, Maynard refused to call a halt after the first shots had been fired. This may be the origin of the story that he was accused of being a 'murderer' by a lady who had turned down his offer of marriage.

From the August letter we only have an angry Huggins account but it is clear that neutral observers squarely laid the blame for the whole affair on Maynard. One estate manager, who was not there at the time but must have heard the story many times, summed it up

in his diary: 'There were two parties in the Island, the Maynards and the Huggins, a Maynard having shot a Huggins in a duel; overbearing conduct on the part of the Maynard being the cause of it. It was difficult but I kept reasonably friendly with both sides.' It seems, however, that the sins of Walter Maynard were not visited upon his sons, the eldest of whom, John, went to Oxford and subsequently lived a quiet life as a vicar in the beautiful Suffolk village of Orford for 35 years.^{viii}

As for the Huggins survivors of this story it seems that John Huggins's widow Elizabeth grieved for a time but by 1827 she had remarried into the Herbert family. Eden Browne, the estate, went eventually to John's eldest brother Edward and through him to his son George Juxon Huggins with whom it appears, now as Browne's Eden, as part of a settlement on the eve of his marriage to Caroline Jane Beard of St Kitts in 1841.^{ix} She may be the widow, Mrs Huggins, mentioned as owner in Iles's list of 1871.^x

It is worth considering that while these stories provide a supposedly 'romantic' backdrop to the history of the island to which tourists are introduced, nevertheless they may serve to obscure a much bigger story. The same Pinney letterbook, which gave some details of the duel, is full of letters from correspondents on Nevis stating the distress and starvation caused by drought, near failure of the crop, absence of provisions and the lack of available credit with which to purchase them. Legislation was drawn up on the island to insist that supplying provisions had to be the first call on an estate. There were innumerable robberies and several hundred hogsheads of sugar were lost to cane breakers. Thus Mills & Galpine wrote to Pinney & Ames on April 23 1822 that the island was in a deplorable state, little sugar was being produced and no credit was to be had. 'How they are to feed their negroes the fall of this year God only knows - starvation and discontent will be the result. Parliamentary aid will be their only relief'.^{xi} The outcome of the duel was certainly a personal tragedy for the Huggins family but in the wider context of 1822 it is worth speculating on how enslaved men and women viewed one out of hand planter 'murdering' the son of another on the 'field of honour'.

© 2004 and 2012 David Small and Christine Eickelmann

ⁱ UK NA, T 71/364 and 365

ⁱⁱ UK NA, CO 152/100 Letter by James Webbe Tobin in the St Christopher Gazette December 30 1811

ⁱⁱⁱ We are very grateful to the staff of the NHCS Archive and to Vincent Hubbard for their help with the Maynard family trees

^{iv} Bristol University Library Special Collections (BULSC), Pinney Mss, Domestic Box I ii/30; see also R. Pares *A West India Fortune* 1950 p313 and p316

^v NHCS Archive, Gravestone RG 9.1

^{vi} BULSC, Pinney Mss, Domestic Box C2 bundle 8

^{vii} BULSC, Pinney Mss, Letterbook 56

^{viii} Suffolk Record Office, Maynard Papers, HA 178/1/32.

The Maynard Papers include plans of New River (1854) and Coconut Walk (1860).

^{ix} Herefordshire Record Office, Miscellaneous Papers D 96/64

^x J A B Iles *An Account Descriptive of the Island of Nevis, West Indies* 1871

^{xi} BULSC, Pinney Mss, Letterbook 56