

# George Ellis of Ellis Caymanas: A Caribbean Link to Scott and the Bronte Sisters

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Sir Walter Scott wrote to his friend George Ellis from Edinburgh on 23 February 1808, the date *Marmion* was published. The opening line of his letter suggests that he had heard nothing from his friend for some time:

Sleepest thou, wakest thou, George Ellis? [...] I have indited to you an epistle in verse, and that I may be sure of its reaching your hands, I have caused to be thrown off 2000 copies thereof, that you may not plead ignorance. This is oracular, but will be explained by perusing the Introduction to the 5th canto of a certain dumpy quarto, entitled *Marmion*, a Tale of Flodden-field, of which I have to beg your acceptance of a copy.<sup>1</sup>

Scott had addressed his friend in the introduction to Canto V as:

Thou, who can give to lightest lay  
An unpedantic moral gay,  
Nor less the dullest theme bid flit  
On wings of unexpected wit;  
In letters as in life approved,  
Example honoured, and beloved, –  
Dear Ellis! to the bard impart  
A lesson of thy magic art,  
To win at once the head and heart,  
At once to charm, instruct and mend,  
My guide, my pattern, and my friend!

Guide, pattern, friend. By the date of *Marmion*'s publication their friendship had lasted for seven years, and would continue on the warmest terms for another seven, when Ellis died. They had been introduced in March 1801 by Richard Heber, the English bibliophile, who had come to Edinburgh in the winter of 1800.<sup>2</sup> Their mutual correspondence, faithfully

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<sup>1</sup> J. G. Lockhart, *The Life of Sir Walter Scott* (1838) (Edinburgh, 1902), vol. iii, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> John Buchan, *Sir Walter Scott* (London, 1932), p. 59.

recorded in Lockhart's *Life*, is still a delight at a distance of almost two hundred years. From Ashestiel in 1804 Scott wrote to Ellis:

All our wise men in the north are rejoiced at the prospect of seeing George Ellis. If you delay your journey till July, I shall then be free of the Courts of Law, and will meet you upon the Border, at whatever side you enter.

And

I wish you could have had a seat on Hassan's tapestry, to have brought Mrs. Ellis and you soft and fair to Ashestiel, where, with farm mutton at 4 p.m., and goat's whey at 6 a.m., I think we could have re-established as much *embonpoint* as ought to satisfy a political antiquary. As for my country amusements, I have finished the Lay, with which and its accompanying notes the press now groans; but I have started nothing except some scores of hares, many of which my gallant greyhounds brought to the ground.<sup>3</sup>

George Ellis was the son and only child of George Ellis of Greencastle, Jamaica, and Susannah Charlotte Long. He was born on 19 December 1753, three months after his father's death. The family on the male side was descended from John Ellis, an early settler in Jamaica, whose own family seat was at Wrexham, Denbighshire. The line evolved as follows — a classic mix of law, plantocracy and sugar, Jamaican history in a nutshell:

*JOHN* Ellis m. Martha ? (buried at St Catherine's, Jamaica, 1698)

Their son *JOHN*, bapt. 1678, Member of Assembly, Jamaica, d. 1710. He married Elizabeth Grace, d. of Col. George Nedham, Speaker, bapt. 1680, d. 1718

Their son *GEORGE*, Chief Justice of Jamaica, bapt. 1704, Member of Assembly 1726-36. He married Anne, d. of Peter Beckford, Speaker, bapt. 1706, m. 1726, d. 1799

Their sons (1) *GEORGE*, Member of Assembly, of Greencastle, Jamaica, d. 1753, m. Susannah Charlotte Long, b. 1733, d. of Samuel Long, br. of Edward Long (Chief Justice of Admiralty Court, Jamaica, Historian of Jamaica), FATHER OF GEORGE ELLIS (1753-1815), poet, friend of Sir Walter Scott

(2) *JOHN*, lost at sea, 1782, m. Elizabeth Pallmer, d. of John Pallmer, Chief Justice of Jamaica. His son Charles Rose Ellis was created 1st Lord Seaford in 1826, and was Canning's second in his duel with Castlereagh in 1809

(3) *WILLIAM BECKFORD*, d. 1764, whose daughter, Anna Maria, was lost at sea with her uncle, John, above, in 1782.

A simplified pedigree appears as Appendix I.

The Ellis family was evidently wealthy and once owned numerous properties, recorded as being Shettlewood and Montpelier in St James, Ellis Caymanas and Crawle Pen in St Catherine and Nutfield, Newry, Greencastle and Fort George in St Mary.<sup>4</sup> In his *Jamaica Surveyed*, B. W. Higman confirms that 'at emancipation (1 August 1838) there were three Caymanas estates, all located on the marshy coastal plain 4 miles east of Spanish Town, and

<sup>3</sup> The extracts are quoted by Lockhart, vol. ii, pp. 159, 175.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Cundall, *Historic Jamaica* (London, 1915), p. 266.

north of the main road to Kingston. Ellis Caymanas was the smallest, with only 150 slaves'.<sup>5</sup> The Ellis family has been called one of Jamaica's leading planter families.<sup>6</sup>

George Ellis, Chief Justice of Jamaica and grandfather of George Ellis, the poet, was responsible for the introduction of guinea grass into Jamaica. A bag of the grass seed was given him as the feed for some rare West African birds which he obtained from the captain of a slave ship. The birds died and the seeds were discarded in a field where they soon germinated and flourished. It was noticed that cattle on the property ate the grass and prospered, and pen-keeping benefited greatly from the eventual spread of the grass throughout the island.<sup>7</sup>

George Ellis, whose father George died three months before his birth, left Jamaica for England with his widowed mother in 1755. His aunt Catherine Maria wrote: 'In 1755 I went to Gravesend to meet my sister Charlotte, then the widow Ellis who with her little boy George, an infant in arms, arrived from Jamaica'.<sup>8</sup>

Before this voyage, it should be noted, the boy George had had his inheritance stolen by his father's brother. Charlotte's husband George had died in about the sixth month of her pregnancy, having made a will in which he bequeathed her an annuity of £1,200 but fatally omitted any reference to any children born of the marriage. He had no sooner died than his younger brother John claimed all the property as heir at law, subject only to the payment of the £1,200 annuity to Charlotte. A family squabble ensued, but through the intervention of Samuel Long, Charlotte's father, George's grandfather, she was persuaded to allow John Ellis to go into possession of the property and to surrender £500 of her annuity during George's minority, in return for which John Ellis would pay for the education of the boy and, when he was of age, he would give him £20,000 and a life interest in a small Jamaican sugar plantation (Caymanas). As a condition of this, George would execute a deed of release confirming to his uncle 'the quiet and absolute right forever to the property he had thus usurped'.<sup>9</sup> These negotiations were apparently concluded before George was born, because in the course of them reference was made to any settlement being dependent on the child (to be born) being a boy. The deed of settlement was appropriately called a 'Treaty of Pacification'.<sup>10</sup>

As he grew up, George Ellis became attached to his uncle, Edward Long, his mother's brother. Edward and Charlotte, brother and sister, were the children of Samuel Long of Tredudwel, Cornwall, and Longville Jamaica, and were both born at Rosilian, Cornwall. Edward became the Historian of Jamaica and wrote his history of the island in 1774. Other works were *Reflections on the Sugar Cane* and *The Sugar Trade* from 1772 and 1782 respectively. He married Mary Ballard, daughter and heir of Thomas Beckford of Jamaica, and became Chief Judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court in Jamaica. His sugar plantation was at Lucky Valley in Clarendon, and his slave village housed 282 slaves (fig. 1).<sup>11</sup> George Ellis

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<sup>5</sup> B. W. Higman, *Jamaica Surveyed* (Kingston, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Derrick Knight, *Gentlemen of Fortune* (London, 1978), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Clinton V. Black, *The History of Jamaica*, rev. edn (London, 1983), p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> *Records and Letters of the Family of the Longs of Longville, Jamaica, and Hampton Lodge, Surrey*, ed. Robert Mowbray Howard (London, 1925), vol. i, p. 107.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> James Walvin, *Black Ivory, Slavery in the British Empire* (London, 2001), p. 9. The British Library has extensive collections of Long family papers which include views of the Lucky Valley estate. One of these can be found on the Library's website at <http://www.bl.uk/collections/oes/caribbean/caribbeanmss.html>.

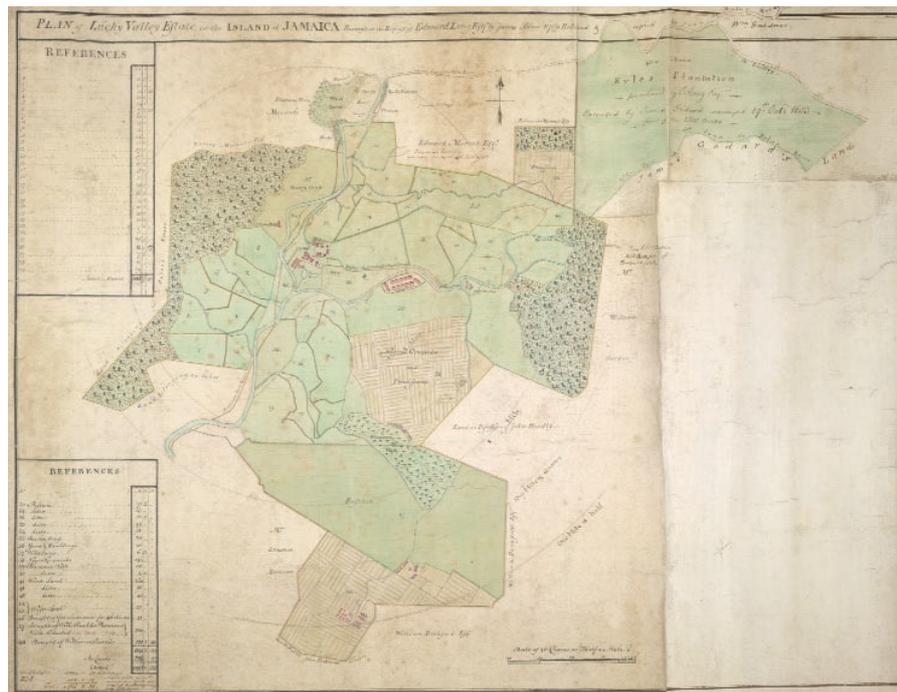


Fig. 1. Plan of the Lucky Valley estate by James Blair, 1769, reduced and copied by William Gardner. BL, Add. MS. 43379, item A.

his nephew, then nearing his majority, wrote to his uncle on 20 September 1774, when he made clear his suspicions about his Uncle John:

I received last night your letter of the 17th for which I am exceedingly obliged to you. My ideas perfectly correspond with yours, but unfortunately Mr. Ellis is of a contrary Opinion and I am afraid I shall not find it an easy matter to convince him that you are right. He is strongly against making a sugar work at the Crawl as you can possibly be, but he will not allow that it would be advantageous to lease any part of the property. He will allow indeed that it might be worth while to accept a moderate rent for the Crawl rather than make a greater profit of it in a more precarious manner, but he insists strongly upon my keeping the Caymanas in my own hands because he says some lands which he has bought contiguous to that Estate will considerably increase the Value of it. I almost wish he would not be so generous as I think it much better worth my while to have a certain profit coming in than to risque any sums on a Property in which I may possibly have but a life estate, though my apparent income might by those means become much greater. However this is one of those subjects on which I do not think it quite safe to venture my thoughts before my Uncle as it might occasion some disagreeable suspicions. You will allow that I have a difficult card to play, as I must be really guided by my own Friends at the same time that I appear to pay the most implicit deference to his advice. I must therefore contrive to make him advise those very measures which I have previously determined to follow [...] The few months which remain before I come of age are not more than sufficient for half of what I wish to be master of, and after that time the busy line of life which my distrust of my uncle's intentions has forced me to adopt will I believe give me but a little time for any other pursuits [...]

Your sincerely affect<sup>c</sup> Nephew  
G. Ellis<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Records and Letters of the Long Family*, vol. i, pp. 134-6.

It is not entirely clear what settlement was arrived at when he attained his majority, but George Ellis, who visited Jamaica in 1780, was never short of money. When he died he was in possession of the Jamaican plantation and other property, and his estate was valued at £30,000. John Ellis, the wicked uncle, was lost at sea in 1782 and when his younger son Charles Rose Ellis inherited his share of the family assets on coming of age in 1792, he gave his cousin George £10,000 in cash as reparation for his lost patrimony.<sup>13</sup>

Stolen inheritances and dynastic interlopers are frequent ingredients of plots in English literature. Scott's *Guy Mannering* is a case in point, where Harry Bertram, the rightful heir, regains his stolen inheritance. Jane Eyre recovers hers notwithstanding the apparent success of her aunt Reed in hiding its existence from her. Heathcliff himself is a dynastic interloper. Ellis may have mentioned his stolen patrimony to Scott, but *Guy Mannering*, published less than two months before Ellis's death, is more likely based on a case decided in the Court of Session two years before. The name Ellis is given to a minor character who appears only once in *The Heart of Midlothian*, in Chapter 50.

Once established, George Ellis became a popular author in both verse and prose and moved in the upper echelons of Whig society. He made contributions to the *Rolliad* and became friendly with the Whig diplomat Lord Malmesbury, whom he accompanied as an aide on a mission to The Hague in December 1784. In 1790 he published his *Specimens of the Early English Poets* which ran to six editions and was edited by Richard Heber. He toured Germany and Italy in 1791 and followed Lord Malmesbury into government in 1793. He soon became the intimate of Canning, to whom his cousin Charles Rose had been attached since Oxford days. At the general election of 1796 George entered Parliament as junior member for Seaford, Charles Rose being the senior member. He went to Paris with Malmesbury in October 1796 when the latter was sent to negotiate peace terms. Negotiations were resumed at Lille in July 1797 when Ellis again accompanied Malmesbury. In the same year Ellis was made a Fellow of the Royal Society.

Ellis joined Canning and Frere in starting the *Anti-Jacobin*, which gave him the opportunity of attacking the Whigs as he had once lampooned Pitt and his followers in the *Rolliad*. He never spoke in the Commons and never stood for re-election. He was privy to discussions between Pitt and Canning on peace negotiations in December 1799. As one of the leading 'moderate' West Indians in the House, he opposed the immediate abolition of the slave trade, but supported measures designed to ensure its limitation and ultimate abolition.<sup>14</sup>

In September 1800 Ellis married Anne Parker, daughter of Sir Peter Parker, Admiral of the Fleet at Jamaica, and bought a property in Berkshire near Canning's home at South Hill. At the subsequent election (Pitt having resigned in 1801), Ellis did not stand again, possibly owing to ill health. In 1801 he met Sir Walter Scott in Edinburgh through their mutual friend Richard Heber and enjoyed nearly fifteen years of the closest friendship with the author and poet. This mutual regard, supported by the warmest correspondence, is fully recorded by Lockhart. In 1805 Ellis published *Specimens of Early English Romances in Metre*. In 1806 he made his will, as ill health had raised fears for his life.<sup>15</sup> He continued to write, contributed to the *Quarterly Review* and wrote a critique of Scott's *Lady of the Lake* in that

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<sup>13</sup> R. G. Thorne, *The House of Commons, 1790-1820*, The History of Parliament (London, 1986), vol. iii, p. 700.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 700-1. The *Dictionary of National Biography* states that 'the importance of Charles Rose Ellis in the House of Commons rested on his being the acknowledged head of what was known as the West Indian interest, and Canning often found his assistance of great value to him, though his chosen intimate was George Ellis, who was one of the recognised wits of the time and whose untimely death in 1815 was universally lamented'.

<sup>15</sup> An epitome of the will of George Ellis, signed and sealed on 21 November 1806 is as follows: ratification of marriage settlement in favour of Anne Ellis; if he died childless (as he did) he ordered and appointed that all his reversion in fee expectant on his failure of issue male of and in the Caymanas Sugar Plantation, the Crawl Pen and other lands in the Island of Jamaica and all his other estate should pass to his cousins John Ellis and Charles Rose Ellis as tenants in common and he nominated them his executors.

journal. He frequently played host to Sir Walter, who dedicated Canto V of *Marmion* to him and found his company enchanting. ‘Mr. Ellis,’ said Scott, ‘was the first converser I ever knew; his patience and good breeding made me often ashamed of myself going off at score upon some favourite topic’.<sup>16</sup> Ellis died on 10 April 1815 at Sunninghill, his home, in the same week that Scott first met Byron. Canning described his death, after a protracted illness, as ‘a loss such as never can be repaired’.<sup>17</sup>

Lockhart’s text includes a reference to Sir Walter Scott reading his *Lay of the Last Minstrel* to Ellis and his wife under an old oak in Windsor Forest.<sup>18</sup> However, in a letter to a Henry Hawes Long, a Long descendant, Anne Ellis was to correct Lockhart’s statement:

52, Connaught Terrace,  
Hyde Park,  
March 20th 1844

Dear Mr. Long,

In a letter received from Miss Murray today, there is a message from you, in which you accuse me of having forgotten you, so far from this being the case, I perfectly remember having had the pleasure of meeting you [...] Miss Murray says, you were anxious to know the nearest locality to where Sir Walter Scott read the Lay of the Last Minstrel to Mr. Ellis and myself. It was not in Windsor Park, but in our garden at Sunning Hill, that Sir Walter RECITED the first Canto of MARMION, and Mr. Parry, to whom I happened to mention this, has put up a stone, with a quotation from Marmion to mark the spot, near the Bench where Sir Walter was seated...

Believe me, dear Mr. Long,  
Yrs. truly,  
A. ELLIS

I should like to introduce my two young friends Walter Scott Lockhart and Charlotte Lockhart to you. Walter is very like his Grandfather Sir Walter.<sup>19</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that the close friendship of Scott and Ellis may have been the basis of Emily Brontë’s choice of Ellis (Bell) as her *nom de plume*.<sup>20</sup> The argument is based on some tantalizing clues. Sir Walter was possibly the main Brontë model, Charlotte having written to her friend Ellen Nussey on 4 July 1834: ‘For fiction read Scott alone, all novels after his are worthless’.<sup>21</sup> And, in a letter to William Smith Williams in September 1848, Charlotte wrote: ‘Were I obliged to copy any former novelist, even the greatest, even Scott, I would not write’.<sup>22</sup> Lockhart’s *Life of Scott*, with its many and varied references to Scott and Ellis, was first published between 1837 and 1838, and would have been read by the Brontë sisters.<sup>23</sup> Charlotte wrote to Lockhart, among others, with a copy of *Poems by Currer*,

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<sup>16</sup> DNB.

<sup>17</sup> Thorne, *The House of Commons*, vol. iii, p. 701.

<sup>18</sup> Lockhart, vol. ii, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup> *Records and Letters of the Long Family*, p. 521.

<sup>20</sup> Humphrey Gawthrop, ‘Emily Brontë as Ellis Bell: A Pseudonym Revisited’, *Brontë Studies*, xxvii:1 (March 2002), pp. 55-66.

<sup>21</sup> Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (London, 1997), p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> Both F. B. Pinion (‘Scott and *Wuthering Heights*’, *Brontë Society Transactions*, xxi:7 (1996), p. 313) and Margaret Smith (*The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, vol. ii, 1848-1851 (Oxford, 2000), p. 432, n. 1) confirm the view that Charlotte and Emily, at least, read this work.

*Ellis and Acton Bell* on its first publication.<sup>24</sup> None of the great influences upon Emily Bronte, as listed by Muriel Spark in her edition of Emily's poems — the Border Balladists, Cowper, Burns, Wordsworth, Lord Byron and the seventeenth-century lyricists — is linked with an Ellis in the same intimate way that Scott is. Emily Bronte's epic novel *Wuthering Heights* begins with a date, 1801, which is exactly the year that Scott and Ellis met. Her sister Charlotte's own pseudonym, Currer (Bell), if based on Frances-Mary Richardson Currer, shows that the latter was a close friend of Richard Heber, who in turn knew George Ellis and introduced him to Sir Walter Scott. Emily Bronte would read *Marmion* and note the dedication of Canto V to Ellis. Both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* bear allusions to Jamaica and slavery. Ellis was born on Jamaica and his plantation inevitably owned slaves. Charlotte's Rochester married Bertha Mason at Spanish Town.<sup>25</sup>

For the most part, it seems, George Ellis was an absent member of the plantocracy, having left Jamaica at the age of two. Yet Ellis Caymanas, his plantation, owned 150 slaves, while Lucky Valley, owned by his uncle Edward Long, had nearly double that number. Long has been described as a negrophobe,<sup>26</sup> which suggests that his slaves suffered harsh treatment at his hands. Ellis was far better disposed towards slaves, it seems, and was prepared to support parliamentary measures that ultimately ensured the abolition of slavery.<sup>27</sup> Emily could easily deduce Ellis's position from Lockhart, who wrote that Scott once asked Ellis to help by introducing Scott's exiled fourth brother Daniel to some of his own friends or agents in Jamaica, where Daniel had banished himself on account of 'an imprudent connection with an artful woman' according to Sir Walter. Ellis furnished him accordingly with letters to Mr Blackburne, a friend and brother proprietor, who provided Daniel with suitable employment on a healthy part of his estates. Lockhart quotes a letter from Scott to Ellis dated 17 October 1805 which concludes with these words: 'Any word lately from Jamaica?'.<sup>28</sup> Scott wanted news of his exiled brother.

George Ellis led a varied and interesting life, starting on a tropical island in circumstances that found him unprovided for by his father's will. He was dispossessed, travelled to England and established himself in society, taking up writing with great success, and entering politics. He made a friend of the great Sir Walter Scott. His story makes him, perhaps, the most interesting of the Bronte pseudonym models, the most interesting to Emily not least. She did not choose the name lightly. She veiled herself with Ellis, I suggest, not because Ellis might be some family name that could be used according to the practice of the day as a Christian name, according to Emily's biographer, A. Mary F. Robinson, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, but because Ellis was a poet and the intimate friend of Scott.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Barker, *The Brontes: A Life in Letters*, pp. 162-3.

<sup>25</sup> Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, Chapter 26.

<sup>26</sup> Walvin, *Black Ivory*, p. 232

<sup>27</sup> Thorne, *The House of Commons*, vol. iii, p. 701.

<sup>28</sup> Lockhart, vol. ii, pp. 159-60, 241.

<sup>29</sup> A. Mary F. Robinson, *Emily Bronte*, 2nd edn (London, 1889), p. 140.

By the long arm of coincidence, Emily's date of death and George Ellis's date of birth fell on the same date, 19 December.<sup>30</sup> On the death of Ellis, an epitaph was penned by his friend Canning, who submitted it to Scott for approval before it was engraved. It reads:

To the Memory  
of  
George Ellis  
Many years an inhabitant of this Parish. [Sunninghill]

With rare Talents, with incomparable Industry,  
And with a true Capacity for great Affairs,  
Which eminently qualified him for Publick Station  
He had the Wisdom and the Fortitude to decline the allurements of Ambition,  
And while yet in the vigour of his Age and Intellect  
Sought and found his Happiness in the tranquillity of Private Life.

Devoting himself in this chosen Retirement to the Pursuits of Elegant Learning  
He investigated and displayed with admirable Sagacity and Taste,  
The progress and refinement of our National Language and Poetry.  
His Knowledge was various profound and accurate; and he imparted it without effort or  
ostentation.

His Wit illuminated every object which it touched, but its brilliancy though powerful  
was unoffending.

In the maturity of literary excellence he listened with the humility of a Learner,  
And amidst the severest studies he could relax in the playfulness of a Child.

He was exemplary in the discharge of all Social Duties  
In his temper singularly placid; in his affections enthusiastically warm.

His name will long be cherished by the Lovers of English Literature  
The void which he has left in Society can never, to those who knew him, be supplied<sup>31</sup>

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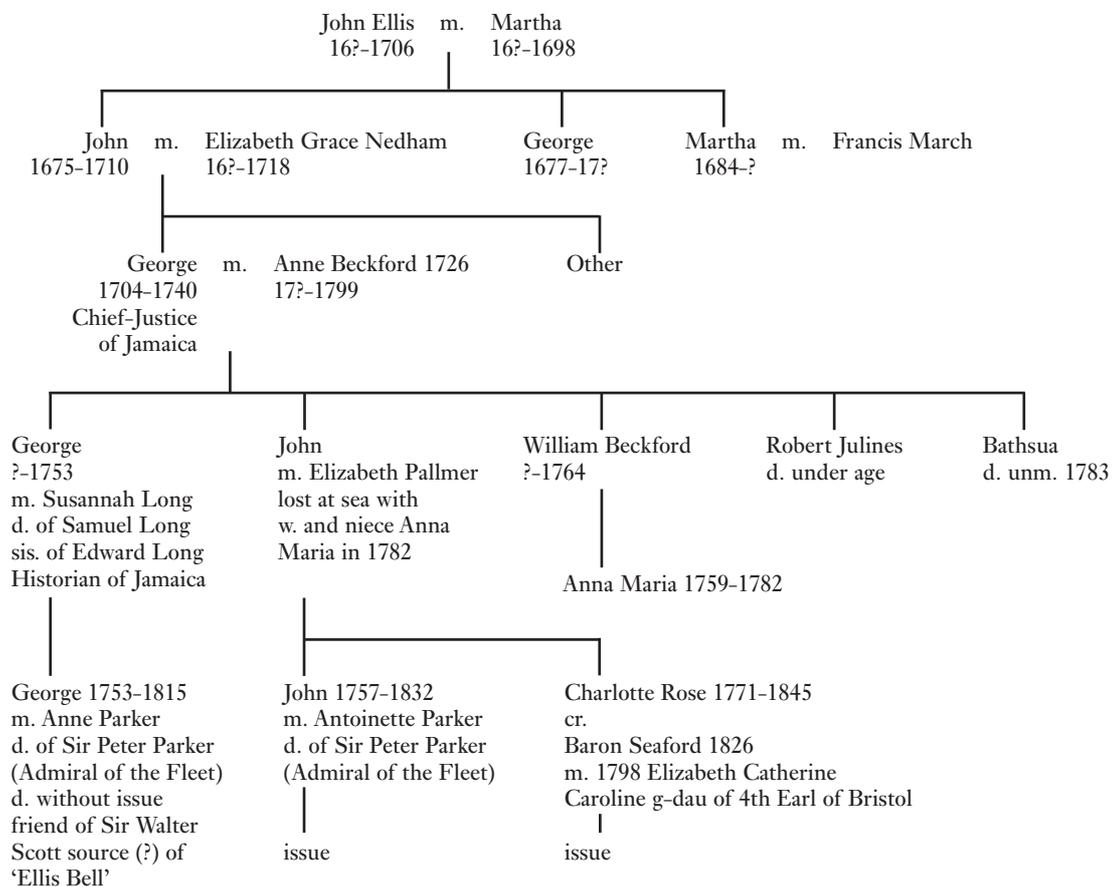
<sup>30</sup> Thorne, *The House of Commons*, vol. iii, p. 700, confirms the date of birth.

<sup>31</sup> British Library, Additional MS. 39791, ff. 101v-102.

The British Library holds a number of Ellis's letters: to J. R. Mackenzie 1794 (Add. MS. 39195, f. 61); to W. S. Rose 1813 (Add. MS. 31022, f. 15); letters to him from Francis Douce 14 July 1800-18 Jan. 1815, and *n.d.* (Add. MS. 31022, ff. 14-60); from William Gifford, Editor of the *Anti-Jacobin* (1797-8) 16 Oct. 1809 - 2 Dec. 1814 (Add. MS. 31022, ff. 65-126); to W. Fillingham [1801?] (Add. MS. 37492, f. ii); to W. Windham c. 1797 (Add. MS. 37877, f. 218); to H. Legge 1811-1814 (Add. MS. 37907, ff. 51, 57, 62, 64, 91, 101, 108, 113, 175-179b); reference to proposed life of W. Windham 1811 (Add. MS. 37854, f. 178); reminiscences of W. Windham c. 1810 (Add. MS. 37934, f. 63); to W. Huskisson c. 1798 (Add. MS. 38735, f. 179); to Sir J. Mackintosh 1807 (Add. MS. 52452, f. 13).

Appendix I

Pedigree of Ellis<sup>32</sup>



<sup>32</sup> See also lineage of Howard de Walden in *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage*.