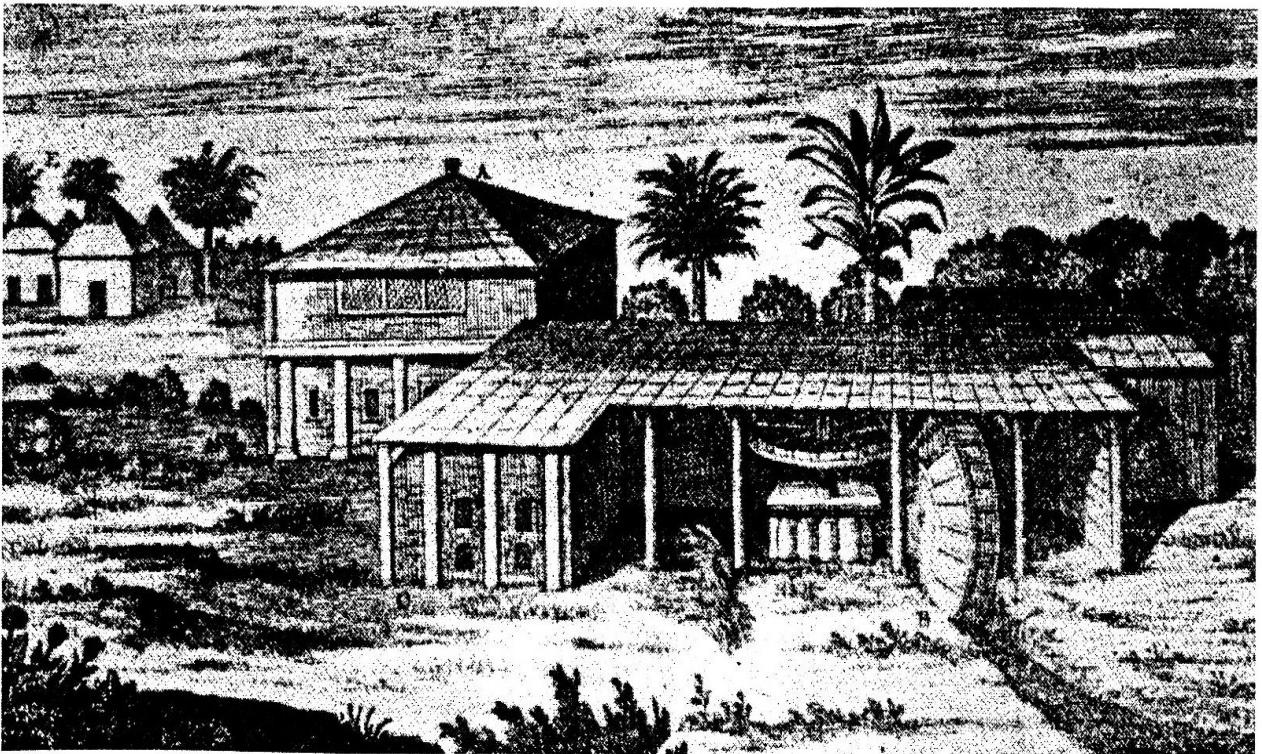


**ROBERT AND ADRIANA SEMPLE**

**1787 - 1850**



Op waterkracht werkende suikerfabriek te Demerara omstreeks 1800  
met links het slavendorp

**View of a water-powered sugar mill in Demarara, about 1800.** This old Dutch drawing shows the proprietor's house behind the mill, with the huts for the slaves (the 'slavendorp') in the left distance.

### Chapter 3.15 Robert and Adriana Semple

Robert Semple was the eldest child of John Semple. We do not know when he was born but we do know that he was born in Demarara and the date I estimate to be between 1795 and 1799. This much I deduce from a statement made at a meeting of the Liverpool Anti-Slavery Society reported in the "*British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter*" newspaper of May 6<sup>th</sup> 1840 which quotes Robert Semple as telling the meeting that "*He was himself a native of Demarara and had inherited from his father a small West Indian property (the Brothers plantation at Great Courabanna). He was as averse to slavery as any man and Christian could possibly be. His inheritance had been but trifling; and such was his aversion to and detestation of anything like slavery, that as soon as he became of age he declared he would have nothing to do with it. His patrimony was sold, and he turned his attention to mercantile pursuits. He settled at Berbice, a portion of British Guiana, where he resided as a merchant eleven years; and his character, he believed, was tolerably well known both there and in Liverpool. He had no slaves – he owned none; neither had anything to do with them except as porters and domestics*"

Robert's sister Sarah was born in 1800 in Demarara and his younger brother, John Jnr., was born in Liverpool in 1807. Robert and Sarah would still have been children in 1807. Did John Semple (senior) and his wife return to Liverpool before 1807 and bring up their children there? Did they return to the West Indies after John Jnr. was born, or was the family plantation run by hired staff on an absentee-owner basis?

Robert was in Scotland in September 1817, it is believed shortly after his father's death. He married Adriana Moore in a private house, the home of James and Elizabeth Ismay, at 26 Buchanan Street in Glasgow city centre, on 30<sup>th</sup> September of that year. On the marriage record the couple are described as "*Robt. Semple, Merchant in Glasgow and Adriana Moore residing there, daughter of Mr. Moore, merchant St. Eustatius. Married 30<sup>th</sup> Sept. by Mr. Wm. Routledge, Episcopal Minister in Glasgow*". Although half a world away from her native St. Eustatius it should not be thought that Adriana was away from her family in an unfamiliar world and it is intriguing to speculate on whether her grandmother, Elizabeth Molineux, (now Mrs Charles Hagart), then living near Falkirk, attended the wedding. At Elizabeth's age of 75 years, and not on good terms with Adriana's mother, probably not, but her sister Elizabeth MacInroy, then living in her grand Perthshire mansion, Lude House, Blair Atholl, would almost certainly have been there, as would her sister Ann Hagart then living in Glasgow. It cannot have been long after their wedding that Robert and Adriana set up home in Berbice, where their first child, Adriana Johanna, was born in 1819. Their 11-year residence in Berbice must have been from 1819 to 1830 and all their children, with the exception of William, were born in New Amsterdam. Thus the Semple family, with the exception of William, were creoles – not a socially desirable status in Victorian Britain. I suspect that prior to 1819 Robert lived in Demarara and then Glasgow; after leaving Berbice in 1830 the family lived in Liverpool.

In present-day Glasgow, Buchanan Street is an upmarket pedestrianised shopping street, probably the principal shopping street of the city, leading from Enoch Square to the modern Buchanan Galleries and Concert Hall overlooking Bath Street at the top of the hill. The house where Robert and Adriana married, No.26, still exists; it is adjacent to the entrance to the Argyll Arcade (No.30). Clearly Buchanan Street would have been a prestige address in 1817, suggesting that Mr and Mrs Ismay were people of some substance. In the letter reproduced below (the original of which was given to me when Elinor Semple died in 1950) we find that Robert Semple's

widowed mother was living at No.2, Bath Street in 1820 and Adriana refers to Bath Street as the “*most fashionable street in Glasgow*”. Bath Street has been well and truly upstaged by Buchanan Street in twenty-first century Glasgow, at least in the area where No.2 would have stood. There are a number of decaying old buildings in Bath Street and while it is difficult to work out the numbering system it appears that No.2 has probably been razed to the ground to make way for the Buchanan Galleries (shopping mall) and to clear the area in front of the Concert Hall facing down Buchanan Street. It is not difficult to envisage Bath Street also as a prestige address in 1820’s Glasgow.

In the letter, from Adriana to her mother-in-law dated 1<sup>st</sup> March 1820, she describes suffering from her first cold since she came to Berbice and we get the impression that after only about two years there she would have preferred to be back in Glasgow !

Letter to Mrs J.B.Semple, 2, Bath Street, Glasgow  
*Fav by Mr T. Moore* (i.e. hand-carried by Thomas Moore)

*Berbice 1st March 1820*

*Dear Mother,*

*A direct opportunity offers for --- I cannot deny myself the pleasure to enquire again after your goodself, It affords Robert and myself infinite pleasure that you are looking so much younger and keeping in good spirits since you have become Grand Mother. I sincerely hope you will continue to do so, it is the hope of a happy meeting once more that cheers us up on this side. I wrote you that I had been complaining very much of late. Thank God I am quite well again, except a slight cold which is much better, occasionally I think from changes in the weather, the wet season set in here very late this year scarcely any rain to speak of until the last month. You know what a disagreeable time it is in this country I am very little --- at any time ! so that I am not subject to colds, indeed that is the first since I came to this country - but I find it very difficult to keep the servants well, so soon as one is up another is down, sometimes two out of three, but they are such care less people that they take no pains to keep well. The old ones are as bad as the young.*

*Robert writes you our adventures in Demarary. Your sister has had an addition to her family since; she had two charming little girls with her and she has very flattering accounts of those at home; she gave me some letters to read from them. Mr. Duncan is doing very well I believe, they (4 words illegible).*

*I like Demarary much that is to say the country - I was delighted with the estates the lands are in such high cultivation travelling from this by land is delightful particularly after you get in to Demarary. The houses in the estates are elegant and spacious; indeed its a new scene to this side. You would hear how very sickly it has been in George Town. I hear they have had more deaths since than they have had for twenty years past; the Almighty has been very favourable to us here.*

*I have already said much in Sarah's letter of your little Grand Daughter (Adriana Johanna born in October 1819) her good qualities and all the rest, her beautys that I am at a loss to say anything more.*

*We shall endeavour not to spoil her but pray to the Almighty to direct us in the discharge of our duties towards her by early and proper instructions; I hope your health and long life may be preserved to you by our Good God; to see her a promising and dutiful grand child to you, she is quite well and enjoys excellent health our Doctor says she is too fat, he is a lump of it himself.*

*Robert keeps his health he writes you.*

*I must now bid you adieu and God bless you. With best wishes for your health and believe me with sincere respects,*

*Yours*

*Adriana Semple*

*P.S. I hear Bath St. is the most fashionable street in Glasgow.*

After the birth of their first child, Adriana Johanna, in 1819, Robert and Adriana Semple went on to have seven more children, all but one born in New Amsterdam:-

Sarah	1821
Eliza	1822
Robert	1824
Anne	1825
John	1826 (?)
Jane	1828
William	1830

Their eighth child, William, Elinor Semple's father, was born in Glasgow after the family's return from the West Indies which had doubtless been prompted by conditions in the sugar trade.

By the late 1820s the cane sugar industry was in crisis. The transportation of slaves in British merchant ships had been illegal since 1804 and although trading in slaves had been outlawed for British subjects in 1807, slavery continued until the Emancipation Act of 1833 gave slaves their freedom in all the British colonies. So between 1807 and 1833 the supply of slaves, upon which the economics of the sugar plantations depended, dried up with severe effects on the West Indian economies. Robert was a sugar trader or merchant and simply had some house servants (as he would have done had he lived in Georgian / Victorian England) but it is clear that some "Semple" slaves were freed in the Berbice area in the early 1830s. The Semple Foundation based in present-day New Amsterdam is an organisation founded by members of the Semple family of Litchfield, Guyana. It is believed that these Semples are either descendants of the "servants" described by Adriana in her letter of 1820 to her mother-in-law, or of "apprentices" employed on the plantations bought by Robert Semple in 1836 (see below). It was common practice for freed slaves to adopt the surname of their "owner" on their release from slavery.

The upheaval of the return to Scotland in 1830 must have been an ordeal for the family. Adriana was pregnant, Eliza the third oldest was then only eight years old and had been left in Berbice to be brought up by her aunt, Jane McBean. The facts are open to interpretation but it seems probable

that Robert's sister Sarah and 23 year-old brother John had already returned to Scotland with four of the five daughters (Eliza was left behind with Jane McBean) while Robert and Adriana paid what must have been a farewell visit to St. Eustatius in April 1830, just before their final return with Robert Jnr. (aged six) and John (aged four) to Europe. This conclusion is drawn from Robert's diary (reproduced below, also given to me in 1950) in which he records having paid \$225 for the passage of himself, Adriana and the two boys in the brigantine *Philadelphia*. For such a large sum of money, this must surely refer to a passage to Europe rather than a few hundred miles across the Caribbean to Berbice?

### **Robert Semple's Diary 16<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> April 1830:-**

#### St. Eustatius 16th April 1830

*Friday 16th. Went to the house, also H. N. Gage and Co. - called on the Commandant; - then went on board the brigantine "Philadelphia" and engaged our passage to sail 1st May for \$225 - I think the sum rather high for the size of vessel - she has however the character of a fast sailor the captain has the appearance of being a good fellow - was introduced to John, Masters, C. Mussenden, Hills, Richardson and DeLeon - called on Mrs. Mussenden*

*Saturday 17th. Went to Golden Rock.*

*Sunday 18th. Attended the Methodist Chapel accompanied by Adriana and her mother.*

*Monday 19th to Friday 23rd. Rainy weather. Balanced my cash and found myself deficient since I left Barbados \$29 and strongly suspect I must have either left a roll of \$20 on the table at Betsy Parker's or aboard the "Sir Henry ----" Discovered also the Burick's *Quadrupeds* and one of the Grenada Almanacs was missing have no doubt Capt. Larsson took the latter. Raapzaat Moore thinks the number of negroes on the island about 1200 - not above 15 sugar estates in the colony - business extremely dull*

<i>Pitch pine lumber \$24 pm</i>	<i>MP \$16 generally \$14</i>
<i>Flour \$5 1/2 @ \$6 3/4</i>	<i>RC stairs \$16 @ \$22</i>
<i>Cornmeal \$15 1/2 @ \$16</i>	<i>Rum 25 cents and nothing for the puncheon</i>

*Saturday 24th. Visited the *Quile* accompanied by Raapzaat Moore. The *Quile* a high mountain at the S. East end of Statia with a hollow which goes down nearly as deep as its base. In this hollow grow bananas coffee and many other shrubs and vegetables - the soil appears excellent.*

*Sunday 25th. Employed writing Forsyth and Sheffield and Bucher, had a visit from Commandant Van Raders.*

*Monday 26th. With my partners. Forwarded my letter thro' Sheffield and Bucher. Went to the Bay and Golden Rock.*

Tuesday 27th. Went to Golden Rock - had a good deal of confab with Raapzaat about Peter and Thomas - extracted the ages of Mr. Moore's family from the family bible - poor Raapzaat taken ill - complaint the Doctor called hernia hounnatis

1759 William Moore born 15 October  
1764 Adriana Heyliger born 9 January

1779 the above married 30 September

1781 James Moore born 21 January - died 9 February 1811  
1782 Elizabeth Moore born 2 May  
1783 Ann Patricia Moore born 30 September  
1784 William C. Moore born 25 September - died 23 March 1815  
1785 John Moore born 17 November - died 1797  
1787 Adriana Moore born 25 January  
1789 Jane Moore born 25 February  
1790 Abraham Moore born 18 december - died 23 Nov. 1797  
1792 Peter Moore born 18 October  
1795 Mary Alitia Moore born 2 January - died 12 May 1808  
1797 Margret Ann Moore born 12 January  
1799 Raapzaat Heyliger Moore born 20 September  
1802 Thomas Campbell Hagart Moore born 5 June

Wednesday 28th.

Thursday 29th. Much rejoiced at receiving a letter from my sister and daughters.

Friday 30th. Went to pay our respects to Mr. Rumsits, Mrs. De Vere, Mrs. Hill, Mrs. Mussenden, Mrs. ---- French, Miss Martens.

Inscriptions in the churchyard next the fort

Johannes Heyliger	1718
Johannes Heyliger	atm 1770
Joseph Blake	1775
Anna Maria De ----	1776
Brigadier general Agil----	1781
W. H. Mussenden	1819
C. Caroline Nyman	1823



**The Dutch Reformed Church, Oranjestad.** Only the (restored) tower and the graves remain at the church, referred to in Robert Semple's diary of 30<sup>th</sup> April 1830.

The *Philadelphia* appears to have delivered Robert and Adriana safely to Scotland in the early summer of 1830 and their last child, William, was born in Glasgow on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August that year. As William was christened in Liverpool in October 1830, it appears that after being in Glasgow in 1830 for a matter of weeks only, the family moved (returned ?) to Liverpool. Robert is listed in the 1832 Poll Book of Liverpool, a list of approximately 17,000 owners or occupiers of property with a rental value of more than £10 per year which was produced to record the extension of voting rights to town dwellers in the 1832 Reform Act.

In the 1841 census the family can be found at Richmond Lodge, Wavertree; however on census day only four members of the family were in the house: Adriana, who gave her age as 40 (although the 1841 census showed adults' ages to within five years rounded down, she was actually 54), Jane aged 15, John aged 14 and William aged 12. No occupations are recorded in the 1841 census, nor birthplaces other than England or Foreign (which included Scotland, Wales and Ireland). All four therefore show F for Foreign on the census return. Adriana shows her source of income as "*independent means*"; exactly what this means is not clear since Semple and Co. (Ch.3.19) was still the source of family income in 1841. Also in the house on census day were Rachel Barr and Ellen Janes, both aged 25 and probably domestic servants, Maria Blundle aged 15, Fanny McGurk aged 10 and John Blackburn aged 10. The last three are all presumed to be friends of the children.

The exact location of Richmond Lodge is still unclear as the census merely shows the house name and not the street name. Richmond Lodge is listed along with some other houses after the last of the numbered houses in Church Lane and before Cow Lane. In the preamble to each section of the census is a description of the enumerator's area which in this case is recorded as being that part of the Parish of Wavertree bounded by Church Lane, Chapel Square, New Street and Cow Lane. New Street no longer exists and there is no longer a Church Lane in Wavertree, but there is a Church Road. Cow Lane has been renamed Prince Alfred Road and is the next road to Church

Road. Chapel Square still exists at the north end of Church Road and Prince Alfred Road. The south end of Prince Alfred Road bends round into Church Road so that those two roads along with Chapel Square enclose a rectangle of land which is currently largely occupied by the Bluecoat School, the Royal National School for the Blind and Holy Trinity Church, the parish church of Wavertree. The name Cow Lane suggests it was a very rural area. After a royal visit by Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria's second son in 1866, Cow Lane was renamed Prince Alfred Road; we know from the memoirs of Agnes M. B. Semple that William Semple, her father, rode to school on a horse when he was a boy; it seems entirely possible that in the 1830s and 1840s this area of Wavertree would have been sufficiently rural for him to go to school on horseback.

In 1834 the Poor Law Amendment Act transferred responsibility for the poor and destitute from parishes to local Poor Law Unions. After the township of Toxteth Park became independent of Liverpool in 1857 it formed its own Poor Law Union, the Toxteth Park Union. The Toxteth Park Union then established a children's home called Richmond Lodge for poor, abandoned and destitute children in Church Road, Wavertree. It is likely that the Richmond Lodge children's home and Robert and Adriana's home Richmond Lodge, were one and the same. Unfortunately Liverpool Record Office no longer has any records concerning the Toxteth Park Union, but Church Road is still there today and so is the parish church from which it derives its name. It remains to be seen if the old building of Richmond Lodge is still there under another name, or whether it was demolished to make way for the Bluecoat School.

In about 1836 the family business, Semple & Co., purchased three estates in Berbice, a coffee estate of 500 acres and two sugar estates, one of 1000 acres and one of 1300 acres, both partially planted with canes. Two of these estates were called '*Mara*' and '*Friends*' and all three were within 15 miles of New Amsterdam on the town side of the Berbice River. A large amount of money was invested in plant and machinery on the basis that the British Government's apprenticeship scheme for freed slaves (slaves had been freed in 1833) would continue until 1840. The apprenticeship scheme in effect perpetuated a form of indentured labour (i.e. not complete "freedom") for seven years from 1833, before slaves were to be allowed to sell their labour "freely" in the normal sense of that term.

However the scheme did not work well everywhere and severe labour shortages occurred which the British government planned to alleviate by transporting slaves from areas where there was no work for them. In two letters to Lord John Russell, Secretary of the Colonies, dated 25th November 1839 (ref: 2), Robert Semple pleads for the British Government to give permission for the transport to the Semple & Co. estates in Berbice 500 "*captured Africans*" from the Bahamas - barren and infertile islands where they had no possibility of work - or from Surinam (the neighbouring Dutch colony to Berbice) where they were being badly treated, where wages were lower and conditions worse than in Berbice. However the anti-slavery movement would have none of this, considering such actions as perpetuating slavery under another name and in 1838 the apprenticeship scheme was terminated prematurely by the British Government leaving former slaves completely free. As a result many colonial estates were starved of labour resources and could no longer function economically; in the case of the Semple & Co. estates it would seem that there simply were not enough able-bodied people willing to work in the plantations of Berbice even though wages and conditions there were, allegedly, better than elsewhere. By 1839 indeed the Semple & Co. coffee



estate had already ceased production while the sugar estates were producing at a fraction of their potential and there was insufficient labour to replant the canes for the 1840 harvest.

Robert Semple's case to Lord Russell was that Semple & Co. had bought the estates in 1836, after the abolition of the slave trade, and had not therefore received the compensation money paid to slave-owning estates by the British Government at abolition in 1833. In addition they had been encouraged in developing the estates by the apprenticeship scheme and by the promises of the then Governor of British Guiana and the British Government that arrangements would be made to procure a supply of labour from other colonies or from countries where slavery was still legal. In other words it was thought that slaves being transported from Africa to Cuba or Puerto Rico, for example, where the slave trade was still legal, could be persuaded to settle in British Guiana if offered apprenticeship and then their freedom there. In the event these promises had come to nought and not only were the estate owners of Berbice, including Semple & Co., facing the total loss of their investment but the colony of Berbice itself was facing severe economic difficulties unless the British Government took measures to protect their agricultural products from unfair competition from the countries where slavery was still practised. Slavery continued for many years after 1838 in the southern states of the USA, Cuba, Brazil and in the West Indian colonies of some other European countries. In addition European countries with no West Indian colonies developed the industrial production of beet sugar which they subsidised, undercutting the market for cane sugar. These developments must have put the Semple & Co. estates out of business and destroyed any possibility of selling the estates to another buyer; in short, Semple & Co. would have lost a large amount of money.

Robert Semple, and to a lesser extent his partner William Laing, feature prominently in a lengthy report of a meeting of the Liverpool Anti-Slavery Society in the '*British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Reporter*' newspaper of May 6<sup>th</sup> 1840. Too long to record here, the document makes interesting reading, describing a rather unfortunate error by Robert Semple in publicly claiming that he paid his labourers three guilders per day, when in reality the actual wage was probably less than one guilder (1s 4d, or about 7p in decimal currency) per day on average. Allowing for 167 years of inflation, this is about £3 per day at 2007 prices. It is clear from reading this paper that the anti-slavery movement was well supported, strong and determined in Britain in 1840 and it is perhaps no surprise that the the promises made to the planters of Berbice by the British Government were not honoured. In retrospect, Robert Semple in 1840 must have looked in anguish at the fortunes of his late brother-in-law James MacInroy of Lude who had sold out before emancipation of the slaves and had snatched the Lude estate from under the nose of his Perthshire neighbour, the Duke of Atholl. It seems possible, however, that James MacInroy may have made his considerable fortune by privateering during the Anglo-Dutch War of 1780 – 84, the American War of Independence of 1775 – 83 or during the era of the Napoleonic wars.

Adriana died of typhus on 8th February 1843, aged 56. Robert is not recorded as being present at the death of his wife although his occupation is entered on the death certificate as "*Merchant*". Robert died in Stafford on 11th December 1850 and his will can be found in the National Archives under reference PROB.11/2131. The will is a long (8 pages) document in poor handwriting dated 9th September 1843, with a codicil dated 3rd June 1844; there is no valuation attached. It is a masterpiece of lawyer's verbosity; among the interesting facts to emerge from the will are:-

Robert owned property in Toxteth Park as well as Wavertree; in neither case is the property identified although we know the Wavertree property to be Richmond Lodge in Church Lane. Semple & Co in 1843 employed a clerk called Robert Innes and an apprentice named J. MacAndrew. The executors were named as Robert's friends John Crosthwaite and Henry Robertson Sandbach, both William Semple's godparents. The 1844 codicil added the name of William Robertson Sandbach, Henry Sandbach's brother, as another executor and guardian of any of Robert's children who had not reached the age of majority at the time of his decease. There are few references to British Guiana or to his assets there, other than to name Edward Birks of Berbice as Robert's attorney in Guiana, replacing James Laing, his late partner there. The 1844 codicil however clarifies Edward Birks as Robert's sole executor for his West Indies estate, having been given a Power of Attorney by Robert in November 1843, i.e. at the same time as he appointed Henry Sandbach and John Crosthwaite as his executors in the West Indies! Additionally the 1844 codicil appoints William Robertson Sandbach as an executor and names Charles Church, Semple and Co's agents in Calcutta, as responsible for liquidating any assets of the estate in the hands of a commercial venture there being undertaken jointly in a partnership with Lake and Carter and Co. of Calcutta.

The principal theme of the will appears to be Robert's concern for his children after the death of Adriana, specifically denying the Orphan Board of Berbice any power, authority or jurisdiction, for example (presumably over Eliza who was still in Berbice with Jane and Duncan McBean). In the event, some seven years were to elapse before Robert died, by which time all his children, with the exception of William, had reached their majority and William was then only months away from his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Robert's fears concerning his daughter(s) being made Wards of Court proved groundless and the executors' responsibilities by way of guardianship were minimal, if any. Possibly for these reasons Robert's eldest son, Robert (Jnr.), applied for and was granted Letters of Administration in March 1851. How this would affect those assets held in British Guiana or India is not clear. In some obscure and difficult to read notes added on the final page of Robert's will it looks rather as though his youngest son, William, was also granted Letters of Administration.

After Robert's death, his son Robert (Jnr.) made an attempt, with his uncle John, to restart Semple and Co., but failed; he married the family cook and moved to the Altrincham area where he died suddenly at Bowden, Cheshire, in 1852 at the age of 28 of a "*pulmonary vesicular effusion*". After the death of Robert (Jnr.), John (b.1826) was the eldest surviving son. Little is known of him (or of his sisters for that matter) other than his admission to Wadham College, Cambridge in 1845 - which can be seen in the college records.

Notes:

1. Following a visit to the village of Sandvoort (8 km S.W. of New Amsterdam on the W. bank of the Canje River) by the Guyanese Prime Minister, the Guyana Chronicle reported on 7 January 2006, in connection with the Sandvoort Cooperative Society in Berbice:- *Sandvoort village was bought in its entirety by Robert Semple in 1853, who obtained it through letters of decree and transport. The village thereafter grew and developed through a cooperative effort with self-help being the principal means of endeavour.* Although this could not be the same Robert Semple, who had died in 1850, it could refer to a freed slave or may indicate that other Semples (e.g. a brother of John Semple Senior) were also living in Berbice in the nineteenth century.
2. Parliamentary Papers No. 151 (1840) pp 47-50 (Parliamentary Papers Online).