John Newall Private Collection of Molas, San Blas Islands 1974-9

Molas, a term derived from “Shirt” in the Cuna language, are elaborate reverse-appliqué textiles made by the Cuna people (Guna is now their preferred spelling) who run their own fief on the border between Central and South America. So exotic a realm will seem a far cry from a churchyard near Dumfries. But William Paterson, who died in 1719, is buried there. Best known as one of the founders of the Bank of England, he was also a progenitor of the disastrous 1698-1700 Darien scheme in south America, a project intended to give birth to a Scottish Empire, but which in fact beggared the country's economy.

Paterson came from Tynwald just outside Dumfries, about twelve miles from where his remains lie at New Abbey (Sweetheart Abbey). His link with the village is unknown; perhaps it was his wife, but she, along with his child, died in Darien where he spent about a year. On the coast where the Scottish colonists landed, Darien merges into South America and they would have found themselves among the area's Cuna who were not unfriendly, but climate, disease and the Spanish put paid to the venture.

Due to its odd post-reformation history, I am a technical joint owner of Sweetheart Abbey. In 1570, shortly after it was transferred by the Crown to the Burgh of Dumfries, a Burgher named Patrick Newall transferred Sweetheart Abbey's “great bell” to the Burgh Church in Dumfries itself. Two centuries on and our family owned the closed and derelict Abbey in the person of William Newall (1572). An interest descended to my father via his uncle, another William Newall. The two of them organized sufficient repairs in the early 1920s for the Scottish National Trust to accept “guardianship” (effectively control) from 1927, although legal tenure was retained.

In December 1973 as joint owner, I received £7.50 for a piece of land needed to extend the carpark. Eighteen months on a commemorative plaque honouring William Paterson war installed at the Abbey, arousing my interest in him and his doings.

Although it did nothing to save his scheme from disaster, Paterson took advice from a Welshman, Lionel Wafer, who had been on good terms with the Cuna when living perforce in Darien in 1680-81. A Spanish explorer had already desorbed them 166 years before and remarked that the women did intricate embroidery, although they went largely naked. Their culture was extensively studied in the 20th-century, and since for other reasons I was already headed for Panama, I was intrigued to have a look at Patersons Caledonia colony.

In fact, in the 1970s the place near the eastern end of San Blas where the Scots had landed was still known as Puerto Escoces, although it has now been given a Cuna name. Little had I anticipated the wealth of indigenous art to which this tenuous trail would lead me, not only at the Caribbean but in the scattering of mainland villages I visited, two in Colombia. It was in one of these, near Turbo on the Gulf of Uraba, that the headman to my astonishment offered to give me his eight-year-old daughter. “She will have a far better life in England than she could ever have here” he explained.

In fact, while his village is far off the tourist map, many of the Cuna are not poor, notably those that receive day trippers on small planes from Panama City or that can be accessed by cruise ship passengers from the Canal. Visitors are welcomed, although there is a ban on

staying overnight. There were exceptions if one knew where and, while I explored a great many other places, I stayed on four islands, two admittedly uninhabited. An enterprising American accommodated visitors for several years on a village-free island, then suddenly was violently expelled, lucky, so he thought to escape alive. Other optimists got quite far in building fancy resort in the mid-1970s, but the Cuna destroyed it even before opening.

Three centuries before I set foot in San Blas, the Welshman mentioned above Lionel Wafer who was a doctor by training, spent about a year living with the Cuna. Stranded due to injury following an English raid on Cartagena (Colombia), he went native, adorning his almost naked body with painted designs and wearing a gold nose ring. That is still today a Cuna adornment, although now only worn by women. Indeed, Cuna men dressed when I was there much as other Panamanian countrymen, differing in appearance because they have become a short-statured race. Albinism, at about one per cent, is also unusually common.

Wafer left in 1681, untruthfully promising to return and marry the headman's sister. I could make no adoption offer for the little girl from the Gulf of Uraba, but I did buy some of the elaborate embroideries that have replaced body paint. Wafer's body patterns were very difficult to remove, and now with clothing the custom has of course lapsed. It is replaced on a small scale by facial tattooing, obviously permanent. Additional to the nose-rings, very ostentatious traditionally inspired gilt ornamentation is worn on special occasions, but this is made for the Cuna by jewellers in Panama.

Women's dress now includes a yellow and red print headscarf, beads and long wrap-around skirts, as well as the *molas* already mentioned, namely a blouse with the front panel hand-embroidered in a reverse-appliqué technique. No doubt this was taught a hundred plus years ago by some lady missionary, wishing to discourage an unclad or semi-naked upper torsos offensive to the eyes of such people. From the initiation of the Panama Canal, the Cuna must have recognised a ready market for their blouse panels, the part shirt (blouse) to which the name *molas* came to apply. They are even made in extremely inaccessible mainland villages in the Darien Gap which tourists cannot reach. This seems to have become an expression of national pride.

While the Canal Zone existed (until 1979), women from the western end of the archipelago visited its settlements, setting up temporary stalls with their handiwork on sale. The embroidered panels, about 15 by 13 inches rectangular, sometime have U.S. inspired designs, for example American eagles or Coca Cola adverts. But anything goes, for example portraits of politicians campaigning posters, Christian religious scenes, animal, bird and fish motifs or the purely fanciful. Many colours would be used and some of the designs were remarkably elaborate. Everything shown is uniquely stylised.

Practically, men and some women knew Spanish by the time of my 1970 visits, nearly half a century ago. Panama's representative had a residence in the capital, an island then uninhabited except for maintained staff and a caretaker. He was able to offer accommodation in nearby huts. During my several stays nobody from Panama was ever there. *Molas* apart, trade was largely with Colombia. Numerous dilapidated coasters all manned by black sailors from Cartagena (odd – it is a white town) chugged noisily around the islands bartering cotton material for the blouse panels, wholly unrefined and very good brick sugar called *panella* and occasionally excellent Colombian rum in exchange for the greatly prized San Blas coconuts

and for fish. Much of time time although they spent around the islands, crew members were forbidden to stay on land.

In 1989, en route to elsewhere in South America, I managed to take my family to San Blas. Good *molas* had always been on sale only direct from the makers but in these ghastly final months of the Noriega regime reaching San Blas was a problem. Panama City was inert. The once smart area near the by then defunct El Panama Hotel was a ghost town and Colon on the Caribbean, most of it always dangerous, needed a heavy to accompany a visit. A quick dash to San Blas on a small plane was eventually arranged and proved Cuna resilience. With the Canal Zone gone and tourism in abeyance, the economy must have suffered, but the link with Colombia had won the day. There, unperturbed the *molas* makers were not as busy as in the seventies, but still clothing themselves in amazing finery and keen to make a sale when they could.