James Glen was a follower of the Swedish scientist and mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg [1688-1772]. Swedenborg published a number of scientific works but, in 1744, his life was transformed by a series of mystical experiences and dreams, after which he devoted himself to interpreting the Bible and to relating what he had seen and heard in these visions. He published 30 volumes of his spiritual writings, all in Latin.

In April 1808 Thomas Staunton St Clair met and talked with 'Old Glen', then in his eighties according to St Clair (although others give his date of birth as about 1750), at Charles Edmonstone’s wood-cutting establishment at Mibiri Creek. He made a sketch of Glen, which was included in his book A Residence in the West Indies (1834). Glen’s final words to him were, ‘Read Swedenborg - and be happy.’

St Clair also drew on information from Charles Edmonstone to give an account of Glen’s life. There are also accounts of Glen in histories of the New Church, founded by Swedenborg’s followers, namely information published in The New Churchman - Extra (Baltimore, 1848), p67.
Shortly afterwards Glen left for Philadelphia where he gave a series of lectures on Swedenborg, with little impact. He left soon afterwards but a box of Swedenborg’s works, which arrived afterwards, had an influence on others.

The group in London continued to meet and were joined, from time to time, by a number of ‘exotic’ visitors from the continent, including some involved with speculative Freemasonry. This added an apocalyptic fervour to the Society and tensions soon emerged. Some differences were based on personalities but there were also questions as to what importance, if any, should be attached to writings other than those of Swedenborg. Some also sought to establish clearer forms of worship within the Society, which would make it more like a dissenting church.

Following a poll of members in April 1787 the Society was re-formed as ‘The Society for Promoting the Doctrines of the New Jerusalem’, taking a high view of the importance of Swedenborg’s writings. The regular meetings of the New Jerusalem Society were on Thursdays but a smaller group also met on Sunday evenings. On Sunday 29th July 1787 this group gathered to hear a lecture by James Glen, who had returned on a visit from Demerara.

Glen argued that ‘the New Jerusalem’ only encompassed those who were baptised into its truths, thus showing their ‘earnest and hearty Rejection of the Doctrines of the Old Church’. Only those who took this step would experience, in the sacrament of Holy Communion, ‘conjunction with the Lord and consecration with the Angels’. Glen proposed forms for Baptism and the Holy Supper which, with some additions, were accepted by this small group and later by most within the wider Society. He was, in this, a key figure in the creation of a distinct Swedenborgian church.

According to Hindmarsh, Glen had gone from Philadelphia to Demerara where he ‘succeeded in forming a small but respectable Society of intelligent and sincere admirers of the Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, which in all probability remains to the present day’. Glen ‘at his own expense, made two voyages to Europe, in order to purchase as many of the writings as he could possibly obtain in England, Germany and Holland, which he dispersed through various parts of North and South America’. (New Jerusalem Magazine, London, April, 1790, No IV, p175). His visit in 1787 must have been one of these.

In a letter to the New Church in London (4 February 1789) Glen referred to the group established in Demerara:

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I have seen Mr. Blatchy and Mr. Mosson. They both continue steady in the truths of the New Church. Sunday, August 3, 1788, Mr. Blatchy, Mr. Lincoln Rogers, Mr. Andrew Shanks, and I, met in Mr. Blatchy’s house, where, after Messrs. Rogers and Shanks were baptised into the New Church, we four received the Holy Supper together, which was all done after the form made of in London on July 31, 1787.

According to St Clair, Glen was now so much absorbed in the study of Swedenborg’s doctrines that he neglected his plantation. Edmonstone, and others, tried to dissuade him but failed. When a large consignment of Swedenborg’s books arrived on a ship from Holland, Glen was unable to pay and, after the matter came to court, his property was sold. He moved into the town of Stabroek, where he addressed meetings of enslaved Africans and the poorer white population, before moving to Berbice, where he was taken on as a private in the Dutch garrison. However, when he was found asleep at his post, he was punished and dismissed.

Returning to Stabroek, he was taken under the protection of Charles Edmonstone, who about 1793 brought him to Mibiri Creek. Glen built himself a hut in the forest about three miles from Edmonstone’s. In 1797 he was visited by Dr George Pinckard, who found him still obsessed by Swedenborg:

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Before I take you from the forest-embosomed abode of Mr Edmonstone, I should tell you that in a small garret of this sequestered home is living a very extraordinary character, in the person of an old Scotchman, an antiquated and eccentric being of the school of Louterbourg; and who is, here, regarded as a literary phænomenon — a literal one he certainly is! he had formerly known better days; but having been reduced to poverty, he is become an exile from his country, and, in this profound seclusion, passes his declining days in the dull and harmless round of reading an old Hebrew bible, and two or three worn-eaten volumes of Greek and Latin. His person is plain — his figure meager, and his visage pallid. In manner, he is formal and pedantic. His wardrobe and furniture vie with the antiquity of his library, and both apparel and apartment well accord with his limited occupation. His wants being few and easily supplied, he lives contented and happy. We found him teaching Mr. Edmonstone’s children to read; and this we understood to be a duty both apparel and apartment well accord with his limited occupation. His wants being few and easily supplied, he lives contented and happy. We found him teaching Mr. Edmonstone’s children to read; and this we understood to be a duty

George Pinckard, Notes on the West Indies, Vol 3, p290.