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Slavery and the Transatlantic Trading of Enslaved Africans: How the UK Deals with its Past

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Introduction:

In August 2018, the University Road Moravian Church in Belfast held a service to commemorate Emancipation. As far as can be verified, this was the first time that a service of the kind was being held in the UK. A similar service was held again this year. Currently, I am supporting the efforts of the Africa and Caribbean Support Organisation of Northern Ireland in marking the 400th year from the commencement of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This was a Dutch Innovation, in which Britain came to be leader. Our aim is to raise awareness of the connections and legacies of Transatlantic Slave Trade to Northern Ireland.

I am not aware of any other initiative within the Moravian Church that seeks reckon with or address slavery and the slave trade, nor to come to terms with the church's own involvement in slavery. We still live in the nostalgia of having brought the gospel to the people of African descent in the Caribbean. On the question of the keeping people as slaves there is silence but on the question of working with the enslaved there is frequent talk. The myth that the missionaries sold themselves into slavery is a nice story by the evidence for this is very slim. The re-telling of the unbalanced good story only results a loss of opportunity to have a serious reflection and to learn from the errors of that injustice. This is like what we see at the state level.

In 2015 the United Nations passed a resolution proclaiming, "the International Decade for People of African Descent, commencing on 1 January 2015 and ending on 31 December 2024, with the theme "People of African descent: recognition, justice and development". Later that same year in the UK parliament, Baroness Young of Hornsey asked about the plans the UK government had to observe the decade. The response by Baroness Anelay of St Johns was that, "The British Government has no specific plans to mark the UN International Decade for People of African Descent." The response then went on to list things, to which the government was committed, that made it unnecessary to make any specific plans to observe the decade. This response of the British government is a missed opportunity to address a perceived bias against African people and is probably typical of the ways in which the UK has

over the years dealt with people of African descent: unjust, patronising and disrespectful. The ease with which concerns and cares of the people of African descent in the UK have been brushed aside, minimised or overlooked is mind-boggling. This paper will look at instances to justify this assertion. The paper will focus on issues related to abolition and compensation as the corner stones on which the UK attitude of “useful only in servitude” has been constructed.

Abolition and the Job Done – Let’s Move on?

The act to make trading of enslaved Africans illegal was passed in 1807. It should of course be remembered that this was not by consensus and there was significant opposition to it. It might have taken 20 years from the time it was first raised. The tide of public opinion against slavery itself took much longer and abolition efforts and strategies lasted nearly a century.

There were two important court cases that significantly advance the movement for abolition. The first was June 22, 1772 when the Court of Appeal judge, Lord Mansfield ruled that English law forbade the forced relocation of Africans from England to the colonies. Force relocation, often for resale, was the practice used by English planters when relationship with the people they held as slaves broke down. The case on which Mansfield ruled was one in which an enslaved man, James Somerset, objected to being forcibly returned to Jamaica. The Judge ruled that under English Law it could not be allowed, whatever the inconveniences might be.¹ The decision had far reaching consequences and implications, not least in England where enslaved people took it upon themselves to walk away from enslavement. This added traction to the abolitionists’ argument that if it were not allowed in Britain then it, slavery, should be outlawed throughout the whole British realm.

The second significant moment was the case related to the *Zong* Slave ship. The owners of the Bristol registered *Zong*, were seeking compensation for Africans they claimed that they lost at sea, in an effort to preserve the fate of the whole ship. In fact, the ship captain and crew had callously thrown 133 enslaved Africans overboard, to mitigate the pressure on their water supply, which they felt would have run out and risked the lives of everyone. Their idea was that if the enslaved, which was for them property, died on board then the shipowners would have to bear the loss. However, if they died by drowning, then the loss would be

¹ David Olusago, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, London: MacMillan, 2016, 137.

covered by the insurers. The Chief Justice, the same Mansfield who made the landmark ruling a decade before, heard the case and in 1783 ruled against the shipowners.² The heartless, depravity of the ship owners was exposed in the court as they tried to make the case for compensation. They hung their case on the assertion that the Africans they murdered constituted loss property. The moral outrage arising from the case helped to solidify the cause for abolition, which was at first only concerned with the dangers of the trade, not the fact of enslavement. This attitude led one prominent Belfast businessman, Waddell Cunningham, in 1786 to propose developing a slave shipping business out of Belfast, believing that he could offer a more humane trade. This proposition was made to sympathetic ears who with whom Cunningham sat, with others of abolitionist bent, in the board room of the Belfast Charitable Society. Happily, for Belfast, his proposal didn't gain sufficient support and was eventually dropped. The abolitionist movement gathered momentum and the 1807 Act to make the shipping of enslaved Africans illegal was passed. Twenty-six year later the Act to outlaw the enslavement of African was passed.

The achievement of the abolitionists is the story that people in the UK know and, by and large, love to tell. However, consistently presenting only the morally high ground of the abolitionists, served to conceal the other issues associated with abolition, namely the revolt of the enslaved and the inefficiency and failures of forced labour, which caused the sugar economy to succumb to the pressures of the industrial revolution. Already in 1807 the economic argument was made that favoured ending the system of forced labour. The PM at the time, William Wyndham Grenville, denounced economic objections to the proposal to end slave trading by declaring that the West Indies planters already produced more than they could sell and continuation would result in their ruin.³

The story, which the British do not seem to know or chose not to tell, is that in addition to the immorality of forced labour, by the 2nd half of the 18th century downturn in the West Indies sugar industry was already evident. According to Eric Williams, former PM of Trinidad and Tobago, colonial forced labour and the sugar economy was a vicious, inefficient and unprofitable economic system that was being supported by business interests that could not

² Olusago, 205.

³http://abolition.e2bn.org/people_65.html, [Accessed October 25, 2019]

see that the tide was turning. The attack on the vicious West Indian economic system by astute capitalist happened in three phase (a) 1st was the attack on the trade in enslaved Africans, which was outlawed in 1807 (b) 2nd was the attack on the inefficient and inhumane system of forced labour. In this the Africans themselves played a critical role and abolition came in 1833. (c) 3rd was the abolishment of sugar preferences in 1846. 1846 was the same year the Corn Laws that levied high taxes on locally grown corn were abolished. The Anti-Corn Law League was predicated on the same principle to the anti-slavery movement.⁴ The abolitionist gave the language in the form of a moral argument that the masses could understand. They were heard more so because the capitalist interests had shifted from the colonial side to the emerging industrial side.⁵ The capitalist argument that West Indian sugar industry monopoly was inefficient and unprofitable was not easily heard. On the opposing side of that argument were oligarch imperial interest unable to see the inevitable. However, as we shall see in the next section, those who opposed abolition were handsomely compensated, despite their stubbornness and blindness.

As far as Britain was concerned, then, once slavery itself was abolished, the job was done. There was no need to tell another story and the only thing to be concerned with was the economic loss of the plantation owners and it is to this we must now turn our attention in considering British response.

Compensation vs Reparation

The assertion that the wealth of 18th century Britain was derived in large respect from slave labour is well attested. University College London has built up a database of families that

⁴ A sort of poetic justice, which makes the point about UK mercantile interest upstaging West Indian sugar interest was that Plantation house, now Plantation Place, which evolved from companies owned by slave - owning merchant Blyth and Greene, was acquired by British Land Company, which traces its origin to an offshoot of the National Freehold Land Society (later Abbey National) formed in 1849 with the two chief architects of the freehold land movement Richard Cobden and John Bright who formed the Anti-Corn Law League. That league, predicated on the same principle of the anti-slavery movement evidence supported the emerging English industries that could only succeed if the sugar industry monopoly ended. Quaker interest in the rise of English industrialism and Quaker support of anti-slavery movement were two sides of the same coin.

⁵ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 136.

received compensation and it reads like a “Who’s who” of the British establishment. According to the *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* Centre:

Colonial slavery shaped modern Britain and we all still live with its legacies. The slave-owners were one very important means by which the fruits of slavery were transmitted to metropolitan Britain. We believe that research and analysis of this group are key to understanding the extent and the limits of slavery's role in shaping British history and leaving lasting legacies that reach into the present.⁶

One of the ironies and a travesty of the abolition of slavery is the fact that the British Government paid compensation to plantation owners for their loss, while nothing was given to the enslaved to whom the extensive debt was really owed. Not even a patch of land was given to those who had to start from scratch, after having worked tirelessly to enrich those who were compensated. In short, plantation owners benefitted twice over, while the enslaved are yet to be compensated and to mention reparation is like “raising a red flag to a bull”. The British state will therefore not pay reparations to the descendants of the enslaved, not least because generation after generation of those in political leadership are from families with direct involvement in slave-ownership or had sympathies through indirect connections. This is particularly true of the Conservative party, the financial fortunes of which rested on slave-ownership. One of the leading funders of the conservative political dynasty is Charles MaGarel who held thousands of enslaved people at the time of abolition. He is described as a patron of the Conservative party,⁷ and his connections to the party has extended in the present period, being direct forebear of Douglass Hogg, who was at the centre of the Stevenson Enquiry.⁸ Douglass Hogg’s father, Quinton MaGarel Hogg served as Lord Chancellor of the Exchequer in Edward Heath’s government. Charles MaGarel’s large receipt of

⁶<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>. [Accessed October 25, 2017]

⁷<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/6914>. [Accessed October 28, 2019.]. Hall McGarel and its predecessor firms were West Indian merchants focused on British Guiana. The firm apparently acted as London agent for estates in British Guiana: it appears for example in the Boulton & Watt papers in the 1830s, just as Underwood Dyett and Underwood, Hall had in the 1810s. The firm also extended credit to slave-owners in the colony, for example entering into a mortgage of £30,000 on the Reliance estate in Essequibo in March 1829. McGarel, Alexander Hall and David Hall were among the 65 absentee slave-owners and mortgagees petitioning the Privy Council in 1826 against compulsory manumission in Demerara and Berbice. McGarel served on the Committee of five appointed to pursue the appeal, which was heard in July 1827 and appears to have stalemated the British government’s efforts to enforce compulsory manumission.

⁸<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2014903896>. [Accessed October 28, 2019]

compensation is particularly ironic, especially because he strongly opposed the manumission of the enslaved and abolition.⁹

With the refusal of the state to countenance reparation, it is left to institutions like Glasgow University to take the bold and ethical move to indicate that it will seek to make amends. The institution has acknowledged the fact that it was the beneficiary of the income from slavery and has made a pay-back gesture in recognition of this. It aims to raise monies to be spent over the next 20 years in setting up and running the Glasgow-Caribbean Centre for Development Research. It will be managed in partnership with the University of the West Indies. The centre, to be co-located in Glasgow and the Caribbean, will sponsor research work and raise awareness of the history of slavery and its impact around the world.¹⁰

From the perspective of today, one is at a loss to understand how the British Government could have treated the former slaves so callously. Yet in a certain sense the unjust treatment expressed in the inability to see the need for compensation is indicative of the perception of the enslaved Africans. Their perceived value, which ended with abolition, was hinged to their servitude. The idea of paying compensation to them would suggest that, like the former slave owners, they have a future value for their respective societies, apart from servitude. The same attitude is illustrated in the way that black British footballers and athletes are treated: if their performances are outstanding, then all is well. However, should they underperform, like miss

⁹ MaGarel became Chairman of the Committee of Mexican Bondholders in one of the periodic upheavals in international bond markets in the mid-1850s; he was also a director of the Colonial Bank. He invested in industry: this is a classic confirmation of Williams' thesis that profits from slavery (not just the slave-trade) fed Britain's industrial revolution. McGarel was one of the major investors in the Maesteg iron industry alongside a fellow slave-owner and West India merchant James Cavan, subscribing £10,000 to the Llynvi Iron Company in 1845 and increasing the investment to £12,500 in its restructuring as the Llynvi Vale Iron Co. in 1853. McGarel also subscribed in the railway boom: £4000 to the London & Brighton Railway in 1837, and much larger amounts in the mid-1840s: £45,000 to the London, Chatham and North Kent line and £5,000 to the Edinburgh & Northern in 1845, and a further £27,500 to the North Kent and £5,000 to the British & Irish Union in 1846. As an aside, his brother Peter was also a railway investor subscribing £5000 to the Belfast & Ballymena line in 1845. Charles McGarel flirted with a political career, being put forward by the Conservatives for Worcester in the May 1852 by-election, but 'as he was not explicit on the subject of "Protection", he found so little favour with the voters that after four days' canvassing he left the city'. He died a very wealthy man in 1876, leaving £500,000, making him in turn one of the richest men in Britain dying that year. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/6914>. [Accessed October 28, 2019.]

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-49435041> . [Accessed October 25, 2019.]

a goal in a penalty shoot-out, they are subjected to extensive racial abuse. White players do not suffer the same ignominy.

The mentality that affirms “usefulness only in servitude” is that which objects to reparation but instead compensated those who perpetrated the injustice. It is the same mentality that fuels the extensive racial abuse, which we see, especially in social media, and underpins institutional racism, whether in the BBC, the police or educational institutions. That “usefulness only in servitude” is less evident in the health and social services but seemed to have informed the treatment of people of West Indian descent in the Windrush Scandal. It could be argued that what led to the Scandal was already set in motion with the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act which, together with later immigration laws passed under David Cameron, removed the legal safeguards that offered protection to the Windrush generation.¹¹

Enduring Legacies

The Centre for *Legacies of British Slave-ownership (LBS)*, has identified about 2,787 individuals who are direct beneficiaries either from slave-plantations profits or from compensation after abolition. These individuals invested in a variety of prominent firms and business entities which, today, are part of the economic fabric of the UK. These firms include Lloyd’s Bank, precursor companies to Barclay’s Bank,¹² railway junctions at Portsmouth, Oxford and Cambridge, as well as other extensive railway investment.¹³

¹¹ The name of the act explains its intent: *An Act to make temporary provision for controlling the immigration into the United Kingdom of Commonwealth citizens; to authorise the deportation from the United Kingdom of certain Commonwealth citizens convicted of offences and recommended by the court for deportation; to amend the qualifications required of Commonwealth citizens applying for citizenship under the British Nationality Act, 1948; to make corresponding provisions in respect of British protected persons and citizens of the Republic of Ireland; and for purposes connected with the matters aforesaid.*

¹²<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/legacies/> . [Accessed October 28, 2019.]

¹³ These include places like Axholme, Gainsborough, Goole and York and North Midland Junction, London and Norwich, Irish North Midland , Guildford, Chichester and Portsmouth, Waterford, Wexford, Wicklow and Dublin North Staffordshire (Pottery Line), Caledonian, Shrewsbury and Birmingham, Shrewsbury and Birmingham, Northern, Eastern Counties (Cambridge and Lincoln Line), Manchester and Liverpool Junction, London, Worcester and South Staffordshire (Extension from Dudley to Wolverhampton), York and Lancaster, New Ross

In addition, there are over 600 firms with direct connections to this legacy of enrichment from the enslavement of Africans. These firms include the Bank of England which had on its board of governors some whose direct earning or inherited wealth was similarly derived from slavery.¹⁴ Another outstanding firm in this infamous list of beneficiaries in Plantation House [demolished to make way for the current Plantation Place] at Fenchurch Street, London. The story of the precursor companies should be seen in the name, "Plantation". In addition to being a leading centre of tea trading, it also housed other mercantile interests including sugar, rubber and cotton. Plantation house evolved from the fortunes of James Blyth and Benjamin Buck Greene, who had interests in East India and Brazil. Greene turned to Brazilian sugar after 1846, when preferential access for West Indies sugar ended. He submitted claim for losses after slavery in Brazil was abolished in 1888. This was 55 years after it was abolished in the rest of the British empire and even though trading of enslaved people was abolished in 1807, 81 years earlier.¹⁵

Conclusion

The legacies of African enslavement live on today. By focussing on the achievements of the abolition movement, Britain wants to credit itself with ending an evil system. The acts of parliament to outlaw both trading of enslaved Africans and slavery itself were important developments. More important for the passing of those laws, however, were the capitalist interest in shifting focus from West Indian sugar monopoly to support of the emerging

and Carlow Junction, Ely and Huntingdon, Huntingdon, St. Ives and Wisbech Railway, & Dundalk and Enniskillen, Cambridge and Lincoln, London, Worcester and South Staffordshire, London and Worcester and South Staffordshire (Extension from Dudley to Wolverhampton). For further details see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/legacies/>. Accessed October 25, 2019]

¹⁴ These predominantly 19th century governors included Beeston Long junior, Timothy Abraham Curtis, Bonamy Dobree, Thomson Hankey junior, Jeremiah Harman, Benjamin Buck Greene, Alfred Latham, Sheffield Neave, John Horsley Palmer, Sir John Rae Reid 2nd Bart, John Horsley Palmer, Samuel Hibbert, Sir George Blackman Harnage Bart, Samuel Turner III, Ebenezer Maitland, Thomas Boddington of Clapton, William Snell senior, Peter Isaac Thellusson 1st Baron Rendlesham, William Manning, John Pearse, Nathaniel Bogle French senior, Henry Davidson senior, Sir Thomas Neave 2nd Bart., Sir Richard Neave 1st Bart, Thomas Baring, Benjamin Buck Greene. See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/firms/> [Accessed October 28, 2019]

¹⁵ Today, just one hundred and twenty-five years after slavery was abolished, Brazil still faces the repercussions of its near 400-year human trafficking legacy. There is an urgent need for resurging abolition efforts to combat a battle that has moved from the brutality of plantation life to brutality in the streets: sex trafficking. See <https://exoduscry.com/blog/general/history-of-slavery-and-abolition-in-brazil/#targetText=The%20struggle%20for%20total%20abolition,Hemisphere%20to%20formally%20abolish%20slavery.> [Accessed October 28, 2019]

industrial developments, particularly in England. Abolition then was more about securing British interest than about the enslaved. This is evidenced in the fact that those compensated after abolition were those who held the Africans in captivity and not the enslaved themselves. It is also true that the abolitionist didn't argue for the enslaved to be compensated. With their compensation former slave-owners reinvested their gain in other industries in the UK. No loss was suffered as they moved seamlessly from one industry to another.

Like the profit made off the back of enslaved Africans, the disregard for their welfare and well-being are material in the fabric of modern British Society. The attitude of "useful only in servitude", which was first clearly expressed in the exclusion from compensation, and subsequently in Commonwealth immigration laws, finds its current expression in the unwillingness to observe the UN Decade of people of African Descent, the Windrush Scandal, institutional racism and the plethora of racist acts against people of Africa and African descent.