

Proceedings of the Ninth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference at Yale University, co-sponsored by the Yale Center for British Art

The Legacies of Slavery and Emancipation: Jamaica in the Atlantic World

November 1-3, 2007
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut

Britain 2007: Problematizing Histories

Catherine Hall, University College, London

Available online at <http://www.yale.edu/glc/belisario/hall.pdf>

© Do not cite without the author's permission

2007, the bi-centenary of the abolition of the slave trade, has seen the most unprecedented explosion of activities in Britain focused on the slave trade and slavery, abolition and emancipation. In so far as there was a collective memory prior to this year on issues of the slave trade and slavery it was probably one of Britain's pride in having led the world, or so it was thought, in abolition and emancipation. The cornucopia of exhibitions, books, documentaries, theatrical productions and educational initiatives this year has put such an interpretation seriously in question. While understandings of Britain's role in the slave trade and slavery are seriously contested, a celebration of white abolitionists can no longer be said to be the dominant strand of interpretation. What we have seen this year is an extraordinary public debate, at many different levels, on Britain's imperial history. While histories of empire have been hotly contested in the last few years amongst academics, the scale of the events around 2007 is quite different. The level of engagement from so many different constituencies is highly unusual. While the implications of all this are impossible to predict it is undoubtedly the case that orthodox histories have been disrupted and new narratives have achieved a much greater level of public visibility.

Nobody could have foreseen the ways in which the opportunity of the bi-centenary would be taken up. Major new exhibitions have been curated in Liverpool, Bristol, Hull,

Birmingham, London's Museum in Docklands, and the National Maritime Museum. Smaller exhibitions have been put on in innumerable local museums and galleries. A large number of special TV and radio productions were made – from the award winning 'Moira Stewart in search of Mr Wilberforce' to histories of racism, plays about the slave trade and Melvyn Bragg's paean of praise to Wilberforce. The film *Amazing Grace*, funded by evangelical Christian groups, has represented the abolitionists as heroes while Simon Scharma's *Rough Crossings*, the tale of black loyalists in Nova Scotia, London and Sierra Leone has been turned into a play and is currently being performed in London. At the local level churches and community groups have set up innumerable activities, while local history societies, some with obvious links to the trade, such as Lancaster, others in apparently unlikely spots from Guernsey to St. Albans, have explored the legacies of slavery. The Museum of Edinburgh has mounted an exhibition – 'It didn't happen here' – challenging the national orthodoxy that it was the English who were responsible for slavery while the Scots led the way on anti-slavery. A major government funded project for GCSE level 3 pupils – part of the national curriculum - has reinterpreted histories of the slave trade and slavery. A primary school project in Yorkshire and East Lincolnshire has focused on working with both teachers and pupils – making connections between past and present from the price of a pair of jeans to the Morecombe Bay cockle pickers – its imperative to stimulate empathy and establish connections. Academic conferences, special issues of journals and new books – both academic and popular - have been produced in abundance. English Heritage and the National Trust, guardians of Britain's castles and country houses, have, for the first time, seen fit to investigate how some of the fruits of slavery were invested in properties 'at home'. And then there are the blogs – giving public voice to an enormous range of responses from violent racist diatribes about the wasting of public money to young black kids seeing their histories in new ways for the first time. Meanwhile in recognition of the significance of all this the government funded Arts and Humanities Research Council is supporting a two year project at the Centre for Public History at the University of York to evaluate the meanings of the bi-centenary.

So, what are we to make of all this? What is its significance both in terms of race politics and contestations over history? We are seeing, I want to suggest, a very British moment, specific to the current conjuncture. So what is that moment?

The plethora of representations of the slave trade and slavery that are on view this year has been made possible by the change in the nature of British society over the last half century. Without a significant black British population none of this would have happened. The re-thinking of Britain's historic role as an imperial power was impelled by the transformation of Britain to a different kind of multicultural society, no longer characterised by the mix of Saxons and Celts, with a modest Jewish and black presence – but now with a large population of people of colour, initially drawn primarily from the Caribbean and South Asia – the imperial subjects who 'came home' from the late 1940s. Those West Indians, Indians and Pakistani migrants have had to make a place for themselves in British society, against a long history of racism and imperial hierarchies, while their own societies of origin have also gone through processes of transformation, including the writing of national histories. For West Indians in the U.K. the struggle for independence, the eruption of civil rights and black power, and the 'discovery' of Africa in the Caribbean have all impacted back on the construction of new black British identities with Marley's 'Redemption Song' as an iconic rendition of the return to slavery as a constitutive element blackness. The work of black artists since the 1950s, from film makers, poets and novelists to those working with photographs or installations, has represented these experiences, making them available to wide audiences and providing a base from which to draw in 2007. At the same time the crisis of Englishness/Britishness associated with the end of empire, the loss of status as a world power, and the realities of a multicultural society has inspired new historical work – a new interest in slavery and abolition and a return to questions of empire from a variety of perspectives. The hunger for history – the roots and routes through which people have come to be where they are - is a striking feature of contemporary Britain. It is these processes spanning the last decades which provides the backdrop for the events of this year.

More immediately there are the changes in patterns of migration since the 1990s, the phenomenon of large scale Eastern European entry into Britain, 9/11 and the 'war on terror', and the moral panics over refugees and asylum seekers fuelled by the tabloid press in recent years. The New Labour government, when it first came to power in 1997, made clear its commitment to a form of multiculturalism but the publication of the Runnymede

Report on the future of Britain in 2000 marked the first government retreat – when it disassociated itself from the findings of that report, in particular its analysis of the historic associations between Englishness and forms of racial exclusion. Since 9/11 and 7/7 the focus has been increasingly on how to create ‘social cohesion’ in the context of anxieties about ‘the terrorists within’ and a series of Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Acts have laid down new policies which recognise the need for managed migration (to allow for the required forms of skilled labour) alongside draconian restrictions on entry. In the last 2 years there has been an explicit retreat from multiculturalism with Trevor Phillips, chair of the now defunct Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), arguing that ‘what we should be talking about is how we reach an integrated society, one in which people are equal under the law, where there are some common values’. Those he cites are democracy, freedom of speech and equality – somewhat empty words in a society which has seen the deepening of inequalities over the last ten years. He insists that the goal is integration, not assimilation. There must be a capacity for change on both sides, migrants should not have to give up their own cultures and accept that of the host community. Britishness, he argues, should be a civic not an ethnic identity. Gordon Brown has long been eloquent on what he sees as the core British values – tolerance, respect, freedom of speech, justice, a ‘shared British heritage’. A new emphasis is needed, he argues, on teaching citizenship, and you cannot be a citizen if you are not British. Yet the values that are being lauded as British seem irredeemably monocultural and remarkably similar to those associated with the Whig vision of history as progress. Furthermore, the question of how this ‘shared British heritage’ is to represent ‘our’ imperial history has not been addressed.

This emphasis on ‘social cohesion’ has emerged in the context of concerns that multiculturalism has led to social fracturing and increasing separation, people living ‘parallel lives’, a retreat amongst South Asians especially into narrow ethnic and religious ties. The latest CRE report *A Lot done, A Lot to Do* – marking the end of its work - argues that ‘Britain’s diversity, which should be a source of strength, risks becoming one of division.’ It is in this context that we can grasp what a contradictory moment 2007 is. AfroCaribbeans are now ‘old migrants’ with long established communities. There are currently one million people of mixed race descent living in Britain, the vast majority the result of AfroCaribbean/white British relationships. Whereas it was once young black men who were

the most stigmatised it is now young radical Islamists (or rather young Muslims since stereotyping destroys distinctions between one Muslim and another). AfroCaribbeans speak the language, many of them are Christian, and they have become style, sport, and music icons. At the same time we have seen the emergence of a black bourgeoisie as in the US – one of the legacies of the political struggles of the 1980s. Programmes for diversity have been initiated both in government departments and in business. All this was inaugurated when Blair was Prime Minister: a man who sees himself as modern, would certainly think of himself as against racism, was proud of the Macpherson Report into the death of Stephen Lawrence naming the police as institutionally racist, and brought black ministers into government.

But at the same time there are very different indicators. The horrific numbers of black on black killings and the media coverage of this, focusing on gangs, drugs, and guns, highlighting the anarchic situation in particular areas and the loss of control by the police, has provided an opportunity to revisit moral panics over black crime. It has also given an alarming insight to the deep inequalities and bleak prospects of large numbers of black Britons. The CRE report deals with the increasing inequalities in the society for the AfroCaribbean population – the unacceptably high level of mental health problems, the numbers of prosecutions and convictions, the numbers in prison, the poor performance in schools, the staggering number of exclusions of black children, the relatively low numbers in education and training at 16, the tiny numbers of black students in ‘top’ universities and the fact that black students only account for 5% of the total student population, the lower levels of employment and the very small numbers in the most senior jobs – all of this amounts to a persistent pattern of inequality associated with blackness.

The memory work occasioned by the bi-centenary has taken place in this extremely contradictory situation when black Britons are both more accepted and still excluded. Like the Irish in the nineteenth century they are characterised as both inside and outside the nation – still a ‘problem’ to be addressed. This provides the context for the Blair government’s initiative on the bi-centenary - and the decision that the Heritage Lottery Fund would distribute 16m to varied groups. This government money has been critical in making many projects possible. The intention was to promote a particular collective

memory, with the logo 'reflecting on the past, looking to the future.' As Blair put it: 'it is vital that we reflect on the past and look to the future. The spirit of freedom, justice and equality that characterised the efforts of the abolitionists is the same spirit that drives our determination to fight injustice and inequality today'. He expressed his sorrow that the slave trade and slavery could ever have happened and invited us to 'rejoice at the different and better times we live in today'. 'It is hard to believe', he continued, 'that what would now be a crime against humanity was legal at the time'. He expressed his regrets that something bad had happened, but stopped short of the apology that he had been pressed to make. He signed the Council of Europe Convention on Human Trafficking but evaded the historic responsibility of the imperial state in relation to the slave trade and slavery. In part this was, of course, to sidestep the question of reparations which has been increasingly on the agenda while symbolic too of a wider reluctance to confront an awkward history. Blair's statement pointed to the merchants as those responsible for the trade, erasing state complicity in the Royal Africa Company and the navy's protection of the trade, not to speak of imperial military conquest. He made his comments, he said, in the context of 'the enormous contribution today of black African and Caribbean communities to our nation'. The government itself sponsored a commemorative coin and 6 stamps celebrating individual contributions to abolition including Equiano and Sancho as well as the more familiar figures of Wilberforce, Clarkson and Hannah More. An exhibition was mounted at Westminster focusing on the parliamentary history and a service of commemoration held in Westminster Abbey. All of this it might be said was to encourage a collective memory of pride in 'our' history, this 'shared legacy' – from the heroic efforts of the early abolitionists (now recognised as including one or two significant black figures) to the image of Britain that Blair has attempted to promote, a nation that leads on humanitarian questions and that is not afraid to act, whether in Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Iraq or Afghanistan.

It is unlikely that such a perspective was shared by all those involved in the government committees set up. What is certain is that the money that was released has encouraged and facilitated an enormous range of activities that were already being planned, building on the work of artists, writers and historians over the last decades, sometimes challenging orthodoxies and disrupting narratives, sometimes confirming a story of white heroism, sometimes exaggerating black resistance to the exclusion of all other factors, but always

making space for public debate on questions of the slave trade and slavery. Melvyn Bragg, a leading radio and TV presenter and friend of New Labour, used his flagship programme 'In Our Times' to unequivocally celebrate William Wilberforce as one of the greatest Englishmen ever, the architect of the abolition of the trade. Rather than drawing on the extensive historiography that demonstrates the significance of black resistance to the destruction of the slave trade and slavery, or the equally extensive work exploring the relation between slavery and the development of capitalism, he chose as his leading historian the frontbench Tory, William Hague, whose admiring biography of Wilberforce has been one of this year's slew of new books. Yet this programme has been the subject of extensive comment demonstrating the gap between the intentions of any producer and audience reception. A very different picture was elaborated in another BBC effort – a programme in which the well-known AfroCaribbean newsreader, Moira Stewart, went on a journey to West Africa and Jamaica, as well as Hull, London, and Birmingham, to investigate how the trade was abolished and what the role of Wilberforce really was. This offered a very different narrative from that of the heroic white abolitionists – reminding viewers of the realities of the trade and slavery, commemorating enslaved rebels, and focusing on the troubled voyage of discovery into her own past of one black woman.

Voyages of discovery have not been confined to the descendants of slavery. Andrew Hawkins, of the line of Sir John Hawkins, one of the first Elizabethans to engage in the trade with the support of his queen, found out about his ancestor and became troubled by that legacy. He took part in a reconciliation festival in Gambia, walking through the streets in chains and apologising for the part his family had played in enslaving Africans. He was ridiculed in the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. Julia Elton, descendant of a major Bristol slave trading family with investment in ships and estates in Jamaica,

thought the apology was absolutely nauseating. Talk about publicity-seeking! You could rationally say that the whole of Britain's modern wealth is based on the trade. What are we going to do? Tear down all our buildings? This is probably wildly politically incorrect - and I'm not saying we didn't treat slaves disgustingly – but what would have happened to the Africans if they had stayed in Africa? If you had to choose between living in Dafur and living in America which would you choose? And actually you could argue that most

working-class people in England in the C18 lived in effectively slave-like conditions.

Here what is striking is the continuities between C18/C19 pro-slavery discourse and the sentiments of this C21 descendant of a plantation family.

Many of this year's initiatives have struggled to make connections between the past and the present, insisting that the past lives on in the present. Barnor Hesse argued in his analysis of Spielberg's *Amistad* that 'the legacy of slavery becomes the historical record of abolitionism, not the contemporary agenda of racism'. Similarly the Haitian historian Michel-Rolphe Trouillot has commented on the ways in which slavery in the US ended long ago officially but continues in its institutional forms and in the cultural denigration of blackness. Slavery does not haunt British culture in the same way as in the US, primarily because it happened at a distance. Nevertheless its legacies, and that of the empire more generally, are powerfully present in the racial hierarchies of contemporary Britain. The development of liberalism and democracy have been endlessly entangled with the colonial world. Race is still alive in people's lives and some of this year's exhibitions and events have sort to draw out the continuities without losing the historical specificities. None of this has been unproblematic. My own experience of working in a consultative group at the Museum in Docklands on their new gallery 'London, Sugar, and Slavery' has made it clear both how difficult it is for historians and curators to work effectively together when the demands of an exhibition are so different from that of academia and what huge variations of opinion and emphasis there are even across a group who are all committed to exploring the shared history of the slave trade and slavery and the part it played in the making of modern London.

It will be a long time before we know what this all adds up to. But the floodgates have been opened and cannot now be shut. Toni Morrison famously wrote of the unrepresentability of the horrors of slavery: Beloved was forgotten 'like a bad dream, remembering seemed unwise'. What we have seen this year is a struggle to remember.