

# Taking Stock

## Race Equality in Scotland

## Runnymede: Intelligence for a Multi-ethnic Britain

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ISBN: 978-1-909546-31-8

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In the course of producing this report our friend and co-editor Neil Davidson sadly passed away. We will continue to honour his memory by struggling against racism and pursuing a more just and equality society.

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# Addressing the Absences in Teaching Scotland's Slavery Past

Stephen Mullen

It is now accepted that Scots had limited involvement with the transatlantic slave trade, with just 27 recorded 'triangular trade' voyages departing Scottish ports between 1706 and 1766: a similar number would have left Liverpool in one year, on average (Duffill, 2004). The Legacies of British Slave-ownership project<sup>1</sup> has transformed understanding of the Scottish role in Caribbean slave-ownership. When chattel slavery was abolished by the British government in 1834, slave-owners were compensated for the loss of their enslaved 'property'. While Scots comprised around 10% of the British population at the time, individuals in Scotland claimed around 15% of the compensation awards in Great Britain. Furthermore, it is now known that some Scots were responsible for forcibly trafficking huge numbers of people between Africa and the Caribbean while located outside Scotland. It is estimated the firm John Tailyour from Montrose was the second-most prolific importers of African enslaved people in Kingston, Jamaica, between 1785 and 1796 (Radburn, 2015). In other words, while Scots were under-represented in the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade, they were disproportionately over-represented in Caribbean slave-ownership and as overseers, planters and merchants across the British West Indies and North America more broadly. The recent transformation in the historiography, however, has not been matched with civic recognition.

## Curating Glasgow, forgetting slavery

In the period leading up to Glasgow's term as European City of Culture in 1990, Glasgow Council confirmed the title of 'Merchant City' for the historic quarter at the east end of the city centre. The sobriquet – which originated in Gomme and Walker's *Architecture of Glasgow* (1968) – has proven beneficial in marketing the area as a special enclave with a unique identity. It is now one of the city's most distinctive areas, boasting its own annual festival. While the title was modern, the quarter was not. The location was once home to colonial merchants who built fabulous Palladian townhouses after 1711. The term therefore was a nod to eighteenth-century colonial grandeur, and serves to glorify merchants

and their transatlantic activities. It may now seem remarkable that an area in modern Scotland could be named after traders in slave-grown produce known historically as the 'tobacco lords' and 'sugar aristocracy'. Yet there seems to have been little criticism at the time of the renaming, except by author James Kelman, who proposed an alternative title of 'Workers' City' (although 'Slave Merchant City' might have been more appropriate). While the zone is currently devoid of any acknowledgement of how these colonial fortunes were acquired, a debate now rages about whether these street names that celebrate slave-owners should be renamed. What changed in that 30-year period?

T.M. Devine (2015) suggests that the 'amnesia' regarding Scotland's historic connections with transatlantic slavery is partly due to a collective failure among historians and museum professionals. Indeed, in 2010, he personally apologised for failing to consider chattel slavery in his seminal work *The Tobacco Lords*, first published in 1975. Slavery was absent from national discourse for the next generation or so. In 2001, Glasgow Anti-Racist Alliance (now the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights, CRER) organised the first walking tour of the Merchant City, highlighting links with the slave trade and plantation slavery. Even so, Glasgow faced criticism in 2007 for its muted response when the bicentennial of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was commemorated across Great Britain. Current Scots Makar Jackie Kay noted at the time that there was nothing in Glasgow's museums, particularly in the Gallery of Modern Art ironically once home to 'tobacco lord' William Cunninghame. That same year, *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* could be published as the 'definitive guide to 2000 years of Scottish history' yet contain just a solitary mention of 'slavery' in the index, and even then it referred to the slave trade in Africa (Lynch, 2007). With the connections out of sight at the time, it seems they were out of the contemporary Scottish mind.

The recent historiography suggests that historic involvement with slavery had profound implications for Scottish economic development. T.M. Devine's recent edited collection *Recovering Scotland's*

<sup>1</sup> See [www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs).

*Slavery Past* – Edinburgh University Press’s best-selling title in 2015–16 – concluded that slavery and its commerce had a much more significant effect on Scotland than on England, Ireland or Wales (Devine, 2015). The recent report ‘Slavery, Abolition and the University of Glasgow’ (Mullen and Newman, 2018) provided a figure for how much one institution actually benefited from slavery-tainted income: up to £198 million in modern values, which was used for campus development, staff costs and student scholarships.

Glasgow Museums have responded to historiographical developments, increasing activism and public awareness. In 2014, the ‘How Glasgow Flourished’ exhibition contained an acknowledgement that slavery contributed to the development of the city. There is now a permanent exhibition in the Gallery of Modern Art documenting the slavery past of William Cunninghame and his role in the tobacco trade. In October 2019, Glasgow Museums advertised the creation of a new post, curator of slavery and empire, for a new project, ‘Legacies of Slavery and Empire’, which promises to put a spotlight on their collections and practice like never before (CRER, 2019). While more can be done, Glasgow Museums are leading the way in Scotland regarding the representation of slavery in their collections: Edinburgh-based institutions are in preliminary stages of similar processes. Thus, new evidence about Scotland’s relationship with transatlantic slavery is percolating into the popular consciousness through public engagement activities and the slow improvement in museum representation. Yet one foundational aspect of the ‘amnesia’ of historic connections with slavery – the teaching in Scottish secondary schools, or lack thereof – requires some refinement.

## Schooling and slavery

Slavery and abolition have been compulsory themes in secondary schools in England since 2008 (Devine, 2015). In contrast, the ‘Atlantic Slave Trade, 1770–1807’ module has been optional in Scotland since 1999 (revisions to its content were made 2014). The external exam for National 5 Curriculum for Excellence (History) has three separate elements: one from Scottish units (which includes themes like the Great War, Mary Queen of Scots and the Reformation, and the Union of 1707), another from British units, and another from European and World units. The Atlantic slave trade is taught as a British unit. The National 5 course specification (SQA, 2017–18) reveals that the key issues that define content are: ‘The triangular trade’, ‘Britain and the Caribbean’, ‘The captive’s experience and slave resistance’ and ‘Abolitionist campaigns’.

Under ‘The triangular trade’, the specification recommends as content: ‘the organisation and nature of the slave trade: its effects on British ports, e.g. Liverpool, Bristol’. There is no mention of Scottish cities or Glasgow’s merchants in the course specification. It is entirely possible and, given the relative unimportance of the Scottish slave-trading, perhaps more accurate to teach the topic from the viewpoint of Bristol and Liverpool’s merchants. The implications of teaching from an English perspective are obvious, serving to perpetuate an *It Wisnae Us* culture (Mullen, 2009).

Examination of the past papers for History National 5 (SQA, 2015–19) suggests an Anglocentric focus within the British context. Again, there is no mention of Scotland or Glasgow’s merchants. In May 2015, one question invited candidates to explain the importance of the slave trade to Britain’s economy through this source (truncated here): ‘The slave trade had raised Liverpool from a struggling port to one of the richest and most prosperous trading centres in the world’. Similarly, in May 2019, a source on London’s merchants was provided to evaluate the ‘benefits of the slave trade to the British economy’. Posing questions on English merchants sets parameters for the future study plans of candidates which become a self-perpetuating cycle.

The key question, then, is: how many teachers introduce Scottish themes on the Atlantic slave trade as it is being taught in Scottish schools? A recent visit to my former high school, St Aidans in Wishaw, North Lanarkshire, confirmed that Glasgow’s merchants are an important feature in the course. This included showing pupils David Hayman’s recent two-part series: *Slavery: Scotland’s hidden shame*, which was shown on the BBC in 2018. Teaching the topic from a Scottish standpoint is not a unique approach: many other high schools also do this, although content is obviously at the discretion of teachers and dependent on the availability of resources. In other words, it remains up to individual teachers if they introduce Scottish content into a British-focused module. Anecdotally, one marker at the Scottish Qualifications Authority told me that most, but not all, candidates provide Scottish examples in exam answers, presumably to generic questions such as in the exam of May 2016: ‘Explain the reasons why the slave trade was important to British cities’. Marking instructions (2015 and 2019) confirm that as it is a British unit, evidence related to both English and Scottish examples is credited.

While it seems unlikely that many teachers completely omit Scottish content, it seems reasonable to conclude that material on England is prioritised. This is hardly surprising, given the greater involvement of English merchants in slave-trading while the greater impact on Scotland was via commerce in slave-grown produce (technically a corollary of slave-trading). Even if complete omission is fairly uncommon, the arbitrary decision-making has the potential to perpetuate the myth among learners that Scots had limited involvement with transatlantic slavery. Slave-trading was mainly an English enterprise, although teaching via this approach fails to recognise the distinctive role Scots had in slave economies across the Americas, and the great wealth it brought to the nation. Since Scotland had a smaller economy than England yet industrialised faster, this is an important point: the impact of slavery and its commerce was proportionately greater. Indeed, as Devine now notes, transatlantic slavery was ‘integral to ... the national past from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries’ (Devine, 2015: 247).

Resources for teaching Scottish-specific content within the ‘Atlantic Slave Trade, 1770–1815’ module are now increasingly available. Between 2011 and 2013, Karly Kehoe’s (2014) project ‘Looking Back to Move Forward: The British periphery, slavery and the Highlands, 1750–1833’ produced a resource pack which covered the four core areas of the module (including ‘The triangular trade’ and ‘Britain and the Caribbean’). The resource pack contained correspondence from Highland planters and merchants and was used by teachers who delivered the topic across 29 Highland secondary schools. In 2018, the graphic novel *Freedom Bound* was published (Pleece, 2018), which was based on the research undertaken by Simon Newman and Nelson Mundell as part of the ‘Runaway Slaves in Britain: Bondage, freedom and race in the eighteenth century’ project at the University of Glasgow (2015–18). The work traced three interconnected stories of runaway enslaved people in Scotland before slavery was declared illegal in Scotland in 1778, including the story of Joseph Knight, whose court case led to the famous decision. A full class set of *Freedom Bound* was delivered to every Scottish state secondary school in September 2018 with the aim of augmenting teaching plans around the topic of the Atlantic slave trade. The associated teacher’s guide, however, noted that *Freedom Bound* might seem ‘tangential’ to the National 5 and Higher Atlantic slave trade courses, although the Scottish Qualifications Authority will consider and credit the new evidence in future exams (*Teacher’s*

*Guide: Freedom bound*, 2019). New evidence about Scotland’s relationship with transatlantic slavery can be included in the national curriculum with some negotiation.

## Looking forward

The next generation of educators and learners now has greater access to materials related to Scotland and transatlantic slavery: a flourishing historiography, the promise of new exhibits in museums, television programmes that trace historic connections in full detail, graphic novels outlining the hitherto unknown presence of enslaved people in Scotland, and teaching packs that highlight the under-acknowledged role of Scots in the Caribbean. The dramatic increase in materials, as well as the current Anglocentric focus on the topic, suggests that a top-down refining is required as to how this often uncomfortable past is taught in Scottish secondary schools. Firstly, the course specification about the current Atlantic slave trade module – as well as approaches to past papers and marking instructions – could be modified to encourage teaching via Scottish examples. If a topic is chosen in Scottish secondary schools that focuses on the nation’s historic connections with transatlantic slavery, even within the British unit, it seems reasonable that this should be taught from a Scottish perspective. Moreover, the chronology might be extended to 1838 in order to incorporate new evidence about the profound Scottish role in slave-ownership in the British West Indies. A second, more radical approach would be to develop a new topic, ‘Scotland and Transatlantic Slavery, 1750–1838’, to be taught in the Scottish units. This could facilitate exploration of the distinctive Scottish role in slave-trading and plantation slavery through a national approach that includes not only the colonial merchants of Glasgow but also the absentee planters in the Highlands, bankers in Edinburgh and cotton masters in Lanarkshire, as well as the runaway slaves and thousands of young Scots who crossed the Atlantic. If, as T.M. Devine contends, racial slavery was integral to Scotland for over two centuries, this theme deserves equal footing with themes such as the Reformation, the Union of 1707 or the Great War in secondary education. Since the latter approach could mean the prioritisation of slavery over topics equally fundamental to the learning of the next generation of learners, the former approach – retaining the British-Atlantic framework – seems a more appropriate compromise. Either way, improvements in the broader education on Scotland’s slavery past – via historians, museum professionals and schoolteachers – should ensure that there are no more celebratory Merchant Cities in future.



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