

1 Introduction

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Slave-ownership is virtually invisible in British history. It has been elided by strategies of euphemism and evasion originally adopted by the slave-owners themselves and subsequently reproduced widely in British culture. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (ODNB)*, a national Valhalla, the pantheon of not only a handful of heroes but also (unlike, for example, Westminster Abbey) a much wider swathe of the people who are held to have made modern Britain, includes hundreds of Britons who themselves owned enslaved people or whose families owned enslaved people; almost none is identified as a slave-owner. The vast bulk of relevant entries continue to reflect (consciously or otherwise) the strategies of the slave-owners of the early nineteenth century, who evaded the very term ‘slave-owner’.¹

For example, the *ODNB* says of the lawyer Fortunatus Dwarrior that he ‘inherited considerable property’ in Jamaica, where he was born in 1786; that such property of course included men and women remains unsaid.² Again, Thomson Hankey, the political economist and governor of the Bank of England, is said by the *ODNB* to have joined his father’s firm Thomson Hankey & Co., ‘plantation owners and West Indies merchants’; the firm, again, owned men and women as well as plantations.³ At the same time as eliding slave-ownership, the *ODNB* sustains a discourse that sees the ‘West Indian proprietor’ as the victim of the slave-system and of abolition. In the 1770s, for example, Anthony Morris Storer’s ‘Jamaican source of income all but dried up with the economic distress caused by a hurricane compounded by the government’s American policies’;⁴ in 1812, the destruction by volcano of the estate on St Vincent belonging to Frederick Thesiger (later lord chancellor, who had left the navy on becoming heir to his father’s estates around 1807 on the death of his brother George) ‘considerably impoverished his family’;⁵ in the early 1800s, the novelist Ellen Pickering’s ‘family owned property in the West Indies, but losses and relative impoverishment after the abolition of the slave trade compelled their retirement for some years to Hampshire [from Bath]’;⁶ and, in the early 1830s, the pioneering woman journalist

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Frances de Peyronnet and her French husband the Vicomte Jules de Peyronnet ‘thanks to the income from the Whitfield sugar plantations [in St Vincent] ... were able to tour Europe in style’, but then later in the decade, with gradual abolition, ‘this source of revenue began to dry up.’⁷

Such entries in the *ODNB* thus refuse to acknowledge slavery, even by name. There is no difference between pre- and post-Emancipation descriptions of ‘West Indian property’,⁸ and the words ‘slave-owner’ and even ‘slave’ do not appear. Moreover, the *ODNB* portrays those who owned enslaved people as vulnerable, the real victims. Elsewhere in the writing of British history, the slave-owners, to the extent they are present at all, have been represented collectively as an outworn and reactionary fragment, the losers of history, irrelevant to an understanding of the formation of modern Britain.⁹

Against this background, our project is to reinscribe slave-ownership onto modern British history. Slave-ownership, *pace* the *ODNB*, permeated the British elites of the early nineteenth century and helped form the elites of the twentieth century. Graham Greene and George Orwell, two of the greatest British writers of the past century, were both descended from slave-owning families. Slave-ownership was and remains hidden in plain sight: the names of slave-owners were preserved in families as diverse as those of the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott, the two Lord Chancellors Douglas McGarel Hogg and Quintin McGarel Hogg (Viscounts Hailsham), the political and diplomatic Akers-Douglas family (Viscounts Chilston), the descendants of George Hibbert (the Holland-Hibberts of Broadclyst House in Devon and Munden in Hertfordshire, Viscounts Knutsford) and the millionaire banker and predecessor of the modern Barclays bank, Robert Cooper Lee Bevan. Such names signal the continuities of slave-ownership in the mainstream of British life.

This book presents some of the fruits of our effort to capture those continuities. In it we draw on the data included in the online Legacies of British Slave-ownership database (www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs) published in parallel with this volume, and in which readers of this volume will find the material and sources underpinning our arguments and conclusions presented here. The database digitises all the awards in the slave-compensation records of the 1830s and develops more detailed entries for the absentee planters living in Britain at the time of Emancipation or moving or returning there after Emancipation. In this volume, we have sought to use this underlying prosopography in order to build a totalising picture of the slave-owners by reintegrating various forms of history rewriting – economic, political, cultural, social – that are increasingly separate as the profession polarises between specialist work and ‘global’ histories that operate at such high levels of abstraction as to risk losing their moorings in the evidence. We

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are thus attempting to reintegrate cultural, political and social history into material history, without becoming reductive. We do not believe that material interests determine positions, even on slavery itself (although we have found very few men and women who gave up slave-ownership or compensation¹⁰) but we do argue that we cannot fully understand such positions without knowing the material interests that were involved.¹¹

We believe that the context provided by the database offers a chance to escape the questions of representativeness that haunt, for example, the pioneering work of Eric Williams on the slave-owners in Britain, which presented a powerful litany of examples but no capacity to gauge their significance.¹² We have tried consistently to respond to that question of significance. Our aim is to answer not only ‘what happened to the slave-owners in Britain after Emancipation?’ but also ‘how important were the slave-owners in the period after Emancipation?’ In this volume, we have focused on major areas that, as discussed below, appear to us to be central. But we believe that our work here is only a fragment of the work that the database can potentially support. We have in no way exhausted its possibilities, but have tried to highlight key findings and to analyse the types of issues raised by the search for the ‘legacies of slave-ownership’. The content of the database is itself fluid, not final: we claim it to be comprehensive in its coverage of the awardees of slave compensation, but, as a database of 47,000 individuals of whom biographical details have been developed for some 3,000, it will always be subject to expansion in the breadth and depth of the knowledge it captures. This book and the online database therefore represent a baseline from which any further work will point to a broader and deeper penetration of British metropolitan life by slave-ownership and its legacies.

We are using the term ‘legacies’ in three, inter-related, senses. The first refers to a direct, causal relationship between slave-ownership or other financial ties with slavery and the subsequent activities of those who were recipients of slave compensation, including but not confined to the disposal of the money that they gained. Second, we use the term in a looser sense to refer to a less direct connection where we can say that slave-ownership shaped, but did not determine or cause in any strong sense, the activities and bearings of people who were constitutive of nineteenth-century Britain. Finally, we believe that the activities of those descendants of slave-owners in the twentieth and indeed twenty-first centuries who continued to shape Britain were themselves in part legacies of slave-ownership. For example, embedded in George Orwell’s description of his family as ‘lower-upper middle class’ – that is, ‘upper-middle class without money’ – is the continuing imprint of slave-ownership: while the money derived from slavery had gone by the time of Orwell’s father, the

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social and cultural capital acquired through slave-wealth remained, propelling the family from obscurity in Scotland and sustaining its members within the ranks of a British imperial administrative class.¹³

At the same time, there is a broader context, and we recognise that our definition of legacies is limited. Clearly the social and economic structures of the former slave-colonies themselves are one of the most immediate legacies (perhaps *the* most immediate legacy) of slavery and of slave-ownership, but we do not seek to address here the complex and distinctive paths that led from slave-colony to modern nationhood. These paths have been the subject of much exploration, driven for understandable reasons in large part by the effort to recover the histories of the enslaved people and their descendants. Recent work to (re)integrate the slave-owner into these histories has to date focused on the period of slavery rather than the period after Emancipation.¹⁴ Our sense – and it is no more than that – from our work is that the impact of the former slave-owners in the former slave-colonies themselves was wildly uneven. Many followed the example of the former slave-owner and West India merchant Nathaniel Snell Chauncy, whose will, made in 1848, specified that his property in the Caribbean should be disposed of and that all the money raised should be invested in railway or other companies ‘in England, Wales, Scotland or Ireland or any of the British colonies’.¹⁵ That such withdrawal to Britain and disinvestment from the former slave-economies was a material part of the behaviour of absentee slave-owners, who joined the British state and eventually the British people in abandoning their respective previous commitments to the slave-colonies, is one of the refrains in this book. At the same time, however, absentee former slave-owners also remained invested and flourished, especially in the newer slave-colonies. The movement of indentured people into British Guiana and Trinidad was driven by absentee former slave-owners in Britain. A handful of such slave-owners, including Booker Brothers, who went on to dominate the Guyanese sugar industry until its nationalisation, used the disruption of the Emancipation period to transform their position from agents and managers who were at most small-scale slave-owners to large-scale proprietorship in the aftermath of Emancipation. At present, all we can do is point to the possibilities of further work on the role of the slave-owners, both resident and absentee, in the remaking of the slave-colonies in the period after Emancipation.

Equally, and as crucially, this volume is not about another very direct legacy of slave-ownership, the people of colour born of white slave-owners and women of African origin or descent, both enslaved and free. The records do not support systematic identification of them, but such children are interwoven in our stories of absentee slave-ownership,

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appearing in Britain as slave-owners themselves, as autonomous actors and as dependents. They both were legacies of slave-ownership and in turn left legacies themselves, only a handful of which we have reflected here. Again, the absence of discussion of free people of colour in Britain (or indeed the colonies) as a distinct legacy of slave-ownership does not reflect a failure to register them on our part, but rather a recognition that our best contribution is to make our data available and to work with historians dedicated to this subject.¹⁶

We do not claim that the legacies of slave-ownership are the same as the legacies of slavery. We have used slave-ownership as a lens through which to re-examine the formation of Britain in the critical decades after Emancipation. But slave-ownership was only one form in which slavery came home to Britain, and the slave-owners were only one means of transmission. The persistence of the language of slavery as the antithesis of English freedom was one of those legacies, used by varied groups of Britons across the nineteenth century, its meanings shifting according to the context, as it was also linked to debates over labour, race, gender and civilisation. The *systemic* effects of slavery on the British economy through the flow of tropical commodities into British metropolitan consumption are not captured in our work. We are also focused on the universe of slave-owners at the end of slavery, at a specific point in the mid-1830s. Such slave-owners were *in situ* on 1 August 1834 (the record date for the compensation records) as a result of processes of transfer and transmission of ‘slave-property’ unfolding prior to that, often over a century or more, and so there are often long continuities of ownership of estates and the enslaved populations working on them. There are also, however, discontinuities and our work does not capture slave-owning families of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who had moved out of the slavery business by the 1830s, such as the Huguenot financier family the Thellussons.¹⁷

In focusing on slave-owners, we are inevitably privileging their histories over the histories of the enslaved. We have committed resources to retrieving the histories of the slave-owners – resources that might in theory have been deployed in reconstructing the fragments that remain of the lives of enslaved people, lives often truly lost to history. This decision on our part is not because we regard the histories of the enslaved people as less important than those of the slave-owners, but because we approached the project primarily as historians of the British metropole of the mid-nineteenth century. In the course of the project, we have come to see more clearly not only the importance but also the practical possibilities of linking our work on slave-owners to the enslaved populations on whom the system rested, and in a new phase of research we intend

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to integrate the two histories as fully as possible. It should also be clear that we are not seeking to rehabilitate or to celebrate the slave-owners, but to underscore through the histories of the slave-owners and their families the continuing presence and significance of slavery in British metropolitan society in the mid-nineteenth century and to illuminate the afterlife of slavery following Emancipation. Because of the importance, in our judgement, of stripping away the layers of insulation between modern Britain and its historical involvement in slavery, and because of the investment by the original 'planters' and 'proprietors' in resisting the term 'slave-owner', we are seeking to reinstate that term in British history-writing, including in the titles of our book, of our project and of our online Legacies of British Slave-ownership database, but we are aware that in so doing we are running counter to the emerging preference for the use of 'enslaver' as the logical counterpoint to 'enslaved person' or 'enslaved people'.

The slave-owners, we are suggesting, played an important part in the shaping of modern British society as agents, but also subjects, of that new world. Our investigation of slave-ownership has enabled us to rethink the notion of decline, to measure the impact West Indian proprietors were able to have economically, politically and culturally in the period after Emancipation, and to trace the continuities in the physical and cultural fabric of Britain. Far from surviving as an archaic fragment, with their political power demolished and their wealth undermined by Emancipation, they were able to mobilise sufficient influence to secure major concessions in return for their acceptance of abolition. In addition to the sum of £20 million that they received in compensation for the loss of their 'property' in enslaved men and women they also benefited substantially from the system of 'apprenticeship', which meant that, although formally free, those previously enslaved were compelled to work on the estates of their masters for a further period of four to six years.¹⁸ Since compensation marked the acceptance of the view that the institution of slavery had been legally and politically sanctioned by the state and that 'the nation' (in this case, British taxpayers) ought to bear the cost of the losses to slave-owners, those erstwhile slave-owners saw no reason to assume individual guilt for the part they had played in maintaining the institution. Once abolition was enacted they joined the chorus celebrating Britain's moral superiority and castigating other, less progressive, slave-owning nations.

Former slave-owners were active in multiple ways in the reconfiguration of economy, state and society that took place in the 1830s and 1840s and in which the abolition of slavery was a significant act. In abolishing chattel slavery in 1833, Parliament was intervening in the rights of property

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owners on a much greater scale than previously.¹⁹ The organisation of compensation was in itself a remarkable bureaucratic achievement, one of the hallmarks of the rapidly expanding state. The shift from the use of enslaved labour to diverse forms of unfree and 'free' labour was one of the key changes in this period and one in which the state played a critical part. Despite the widespread assumption that slavery was the antithesis of freedom and that Emancipation had effected an epochal change, slavery was only abolished in the British Caribbean, Mauritius and the Cape, and it persisted elsewhere. Slavery was still being legislated against in India in 1976.²⁰ Illegal slave-trading continued in the nineteenth century alongside variegated forms of unfree and bonded labour that persisted well into the twentieth century and beyond.²¹ The regulation of labour at home, through the New Poor Law and the Factory Acts, and of labour across the empire through indenture were some of the innovative practices of governments that could combine a commitment to laissez-faire in some areas with a belief in the need to organise labour not just on a national but also an imperial scale. While Eric Williams argued that 1833 marked a critical moment in the demise of mercantilism, the shift from protection to free trade was by no means linear. The freedom of labour was restricted in many ways both at home and in the empire, not least in the regulation of masters and servants,²² and the West Indians fought a long rearguard action against free trade in sugar, as Keith McClelland documents.²³

Some of the slave-owners, most notably John Gladstone, had seen the writing on the wall and had started to reorganise their estates before 1833. Gladstone's efforts to inaugurate the use of Indian indentured labour on his Guyanese estates had limited success in the 1820s but were to provide one of the bases for the large-scale adoption of the system by the 1840s.²⁴ Some slave-owners tried to adapt to the new conditions of labour on their plantations, as did Lord Holland and Matthew James Higgins, for example.²⁵ Others abandoned their engagement with the sugar economy and moved their investments elsewhere, using the compensation money to move into a variety of other enterprises from railway construction to maritime insurance and banking, as Nicholas Draper shows.²⁶ The decline of British proprietorship in the West Indies was thus a neglected aspect of the shift from land to commerce and industry that was a feature of this period. Few slave-owners moved directly into manufacture for their interests had long been in land and commerce.

After 1833 the West Indians abandoned the identity of slave-owner and sought to ensure their place in the reconfiguration of the ruling elite that was part and parcel of the 'Age of Reform'. Determinedly not part of a residual formation in a time of realignment when emergent groupings

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were claiming dominance, they declared themselves as modern men, part of the new 'free' world. Between 1828 and 1833, new rights for dissenters, Catholic Emancipation, parliamentary reform, a Coercion Act for Ireland, the abolition of slavery and new forms of government for India together marked a historic settlement across nation and empire. A new hegemony was established, dependent on an alliance between the landed aristocracy and sections of the middle class, committed to an expansion of laissez-faire and a reforming state. Government was to be by consent, if possible, at home but reliant on force and dominion in the empire, including Ireland. In the metropole, public opinion had an increased weight as the power of the press increased rapidly and more meritocratic systems of appointment began to slowly displace the patronage that had operated for generations. Slave-owners and their descendants were more likely to be Tories than Whigs but they belonged to the elite that effected these changes and (sometimes) benefited from them. William Gladstone and Henry Goulburn in the House of Commons, Charles Trevelyan in the expanding colonial and civil service, Cardinal Manning in the resurgent Catholic Church, and Captain Frederick Marryat and Charles Kingsley, authors who were among the first generation to be able to make a substantial income from writing, were just some of the many former slave-owners or their descendants who established themselves as influential men in the reconfigured public world.

The abolition of slavery meant a shift in the balance of empire. The British West Indies, especially Jamaica, once the jewel in the crown, became increasingly defined as problematic and unproductive. Attention shifted to India and the East and to the new colonies of white settlement. Younger sons who had headed for the Caribbean now found their opportunities in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. Henry Kingsley abandoned his family's long-term interest in Barbados and chose New South Wales for his (unsuccessful) colonial career. Compensation money, or people connected with compensation, moved into new ventures such as the Australian Agricultural Company and the development of South Australia and British Columbia. The Caribbean was no longer seen as a place to make a fortune and was neglected, side-lined in favour of more wealth-producing economies. Slavery was something to be regretted and forgotten, best expunged in so far as was possible from public memory.

Slave-owners and their descendants were active agents in the remaking of race as a hierarchical category. Once slavery no longer fixed the African as inferior, other legitimations for his/her subordination had to be found. Historians, novelists and travel writers with West Indian origins played a significant part in the debates over race in the mid-nineteenth

century and the shift from the ascendancy of abolitionist humanitarian discourse to a harsher version of stadial theory, envisioning the civilisational process as glacially slow. They used their eye-witness experience, as Catherine Hall argues, to make claims as to the veracity of their characterisations of racial difference.²⁷ In the process they also rewrote the history of British involvement in colonial slavery, successfully constituting themselves as the victims of Emancipation.

* * *

In undertaking our research on slave-ownership, five definable though overlapping sets of literature have shaped our thinking or contributed to the intellectual context within which we have undertaken the work: the series of controversies around the work of Eric Williams; the reflections on the social and political formations of nineteenth-century Britain of Cain and Hopkins and William D. Rubinstein; the ‘new imperial history’; an emerging literature on the nineteenth-century colonial state; and work on history, family and gender.

Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* included four connected arguments that are critical for us: slavery was key to the Industrial Revolution; slave-wealth was important to the social, cultural and political fabric of eighteenth-century Britain; the West Indian slave-economy was in decline after 1783 and possibly after 1763; and the West Indian slave-owners were at first a progressive force within mercantilism and then became a reactionary faction in the face of the rise of industrial capitalism.²⁸ Each of these has a bearing on our work and is in turn illuminated by that work. Each, but especially the first and the third, has attracted sustained controversy and remains too often the subject of an unhelpful polarisation between Anglo-American and Caribbean scholars. Our data might offer the possibility of a commonly accepted basis of evidence for rediscussion of some, although not all, aspects of these sometimes bitter controversies over Williams.

At no stage did Williams argue that slavery ‘caused’ the Industrial Revolution. ‘It must not be inferred’, he said, ‘that the triangular trade was solely and entirely responsible for the economic development. The growth of the internal market in England, the ploughing-in of the profits from industry to generate still further capital and achieve a still greater expansion, played a large part.’²⁹ Furthermore, what Williams argued was not simply that the profits of the triangular trade were reinvested in British industry ‘where they supplied part of the huge outlay for the construction of the vast plants to meet the needs of the new productive process and the new markets.’³⁰ In a frequently quoted line he wrote that ‘the profits obtained provided one of the main streams of that accumulation of

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capital which financed the Industrial Revolution.³¹ But he also made the wider argument that the triangular trade gave a triple stimulus to British industry: 'The Negroes were purchased with British manufactures; they produced sugar, cotton, indigo, molasses, and other tropical products, the processing of which created new industries in England [sic]; while the maintenance of the Negroes and their owners on the plantations provided another market for British industry, New England agriculture and the Newfoundland fisheries.'³² These arguments have been attacked on two grounds, first by a mainstream consensus that capital was not scarce in eighteenth-century England and second by the argument that the slave-trade (and, less consistently argued, implicitly the slave-economy itself) was not large enough to move the needle of British growth.³³ This second argument is embedded in a historical tradition that emphasises the significance of domestic factors over overseas trade as a whole in British economic development.³⁴

It appears to us that there is now movement, by no means linear but perceptible, towards a modified version of Williams' position among economic historians. Williams focused on British colonial slavery, rather than the wider nexus including American, Brazilian, French and Spanish slavery. Recent scholarship, with a renewed focus on integrating overseas trade into the context of the domestic drivers of growth, and on a broader conception of the slave-economy, has tended to support Williams. Pomeranz's *Great Divergence* sees the Atlantic slave-economy, with its capacity to add 'phantom land' and coal as the two permissive factors allowing Britain to explode from a base comparable to regions of China from about 1800 onwards.³⁵ Inikori in 2002 reasserted the Williams thesis in a history of British economic development that begins in the fifteenth century and combines Atlantic slavery with the commercialisation of agriculture as the keys to industrialisation.³⁶ Despite opposition to Inikori's use of import substitution models, concerns about his conflation of 'the Atlantic world' and 'the slave-economy', and a residual sense that the mechanisms translating 'commercial success ... into long-term self-sustained growth remain to be revealed', Pat Hudson, Maxine Berg and Nuala Zahedieh (among others) broadly accepted Inikori's central thesis about the importance of overseas trade and within that the importance of the slave-economy.³⁷ Opposition expressed to Inikori over the role and nature of technological change has potentially been qualified recently by recognition of the importance of colonial wealth in determining relatively high wage levels in Britain.³⁸ Pat Hudson has recently reiterated support for the importance of the slave-trade and slavery in fostering institutional change in Britain's credit markets.³⁹ Above all, at the micro- rather than macro-economic level, local and regional