

Towards a New Past: the Legacies of British Slave-ownership

Relevant to

Modules on British history in the nineteenth century; slavery; Empire

Background

The transatlantic slave trade formed a key component of the British Empire. Slaves generated wealth for British slave-owners in the colonies (particularly the Caribbean) and back in Britain. In 1807 the slave trade was abolished within the British colonies; this came after many years of resistance and revolt by enslaved people, and campaigns by those opposed to slavery.

In 1833, slavery itself was abolished within the British Empire. The reasons for abolition were various: again, resistance and revolts by enslaved people were important, as were anti-slavery campaigns. Economic changes were also important, as the industrial revolution changed economic interests within Britain, leading more people to favour “free trade” and free labour. And political change also played a part: the Great Reform Act of 1832 had changed the composition of Parliament, making the “West India Lobby” less powerful.

However, £20 million was paid in compensation to slave-owners who had lost their supposed “property” – enslaved people. Furthermore, enslaved people were not to become free immediately, but were supposed to spend 6 years as “apprentices”.

In this lecture, Professor Catherine Hall discusses her research on the “Legacies of British Slave-ownership” project, examining where the compensation money went and what impacts it had on Britain. Watch the lecture here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtyATuC_fxw.

Questions

- How has slave-ownership been erased from British history?
- What relationship did Eric Williams argue that slavery had to the industrial revolution in Britain? What does Hall think about his conclusions?
- How much influence did the “West India Lobby” (one-time absentee slave-owners) have in Britain after 1833 and emancipation?
- Where did the compensation money paid to slave-owners go?
- How did elite legitimations of the subjection of Black Africans change in the mid-nineteenth century, after the abolition of slavery?
- Why is it important to reinsert slave-ownership and compensation paid to British slave-owners into the narrative of British history?

Further resources

Go to the LBS website - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/> - to search the database and maps. Search the map of Britain here - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/maps/britain/> - and the map of the Caribbean here – to find more about the legacies of slave-ownership for particular places.