

Art and Conflict

The Problematic Way in which Slavery and Anti-Slavery Movements Have Been Commemorated in Statue Across the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The United Kingdom's legacy of driving the global anti-slavery movement during the nineteenth century has been commemorated through the celebration of a select few abolitionists. Rather than recognising the horrors and atrocities that enslaved peoples experienced at the hands of British slavers, the narrative has been turned into self-congratulation, promoting ideas of humanitarianism and excluding the experiences of those who engaged in everyday resistance. I argue that the statues which bolster this construction should be replaced with more inclusive alternatives, remembering those individuals and communities which endured enslavement and thus deconstructing the self-preserving images of the past.

Keywords: anti-slavery, public memory, monument, constructed narratives, legacy, representation

The commemoration of anti-slavery movements has been memorialised across the UK. Many of the monuments are statues of men who headed the abolitionist movements and helped secure the legislation required to pass laws such as the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.¹ Whilst these laws ensured vital steps towards the reduction of the slave trade and the liberation of many enslaved people, the sole commemoration of these men negates the agency of resistant enslaved people and contributes to the mythological narrative that Britain 'solved' slavery and that neither women nor people of colour were important in the movement. Robert

¹ Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012)

Nelson and Margaret Olin's work details the various purposes of a monument, listing commemoration, securing a memory for the future and emphasising 'one narrative of the past at the expense of others'.² Arguably, the statues erected during the nineteenth century to celebrate anti-slavery in Britain contribute to the latter objective, creating a difficult relationship between the public's shared memory of anti-slavery and the remembrance of those who suffered enslavement. Monuments, such as those within Westminster Abbey, in London Docks and in Wilberforce's hometown of Hull, help to reinforce the narrative of British humanitarian interventionism and the moral progress of the Empire and since their construction over 150 years ago, there has been little attempt to reshape this account in public spaces.³ This is problematic as the existence of such memorials continues to absolve Britain of guilt and also neglects the experience of those enslaved, 'memorialis[ing] not the victims but rather their "friends" and "liberators" (that is, white abolitionists)'.⁴ It could be argued that in today's multicultural and diverse Britain, the focus should be on encoding more reflective memorials, rather than perpetuating the self-preserving messages of the nineteenth century.

This article will first discuss the role of public monuments within history and collective memory, affirming that often, they are created 'fashionably'.⁵ Then, a range of statues and monuments will be assessed for evidence of narrative building and biased commemoration in order to honour a particular section of British history at the expense of another. More modern attempts at commemoration of slavery will also be included. Finally, conclusions regarding the complexity of Britain's relationship with both slavery as evidenced in statue will be drawn.

² Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin, *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) p.2

Robert Nelson is a Professor of History of Art, specialising in medieval art, and has previously explored how buildings, such as the Cathedral of Constantinople, become monuments of meaning. Margaret Olin is a Senior Research Scholar at the Yale Divinity School and her current research explores Jewish visual culture, witnessing and commemoration and shared spaces.

³ J. R. Oldfield, 'Chords of Freedom' *Commemoration, Ritual and British Transatlantic Slavery* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Alex Tyrrell and James Walvin, "Whose History Is It? Memorialising Britain's Involvement in Slavery," in *Contested Sites: Commemoration, Memorial and Popular Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), pp. 147-170

⁴ Oldfield, 'Chords of Freedom' p.78

⁵ James E. Young, "Memory/Monument," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) p.245

A monument is 'an intersection between public art and political memory [which] has necessarily reflected the aesthetic and political revolutions' of a particular period.⁶ Therefore, monuments mirror the sociohistorical norms of a given time and, as such, can be difficult to reconcile with the present day. Some suggest that a monument is a 'social hybrid, part object, part subject', combining the article with the socialised memory and context of those who observe it.⁷ There are theoretical problems with political visual experiences, the most important of which for this article are 'the relationship of part to whole [and] the opposition between appearance and reality'.⁸ These are relevant due to the frequent double representation of figures, such as an abolitionist and a slave, within the same monument and the attempt to create a particular narrative. Such monuments do not necessarily hide the truth of abolition, but they fail to recognise alternative stories and experiences of British slavery. The context of a public monument's erection, as well as decisions to maintain and restore such sites can reveal information about the construction of a community's social memory.⁹ In the case of British involvement with the transatlantic slave trade and abolition, the popular view was created as a 'common denominator' that could bind together national identity. In this sense, heritage can be achieved through the creation of social myth.¹⁰ Without successful counter-monuments representing a range of experiences and narratives of those enslaved, the constructed history remains at the forefront of thinking. Pierre Nora, an historian most well-known for his work on French national memory and collective identity, argues that the less that memory is experienced by individuals and internally felt, the more memory is based within these monuments and statues.¹¹ James Young rephrases Nora suggesting 'it is as if once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divest ourselves of the obligation to remember'.¹² However, when these 'monumental forms' reflect a biased and self-congratulating history, we should instead endeavour to deconstruct and reimagine national memory to be more inclusive.

⁶ Young, "Memory/Monument," p. 234

⁷ Nelson and Olin, *Monuments and Memory*

⁸ Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990)

⁹ Oldfield, 'Chords of Freedom'

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 173

¹¹ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire," *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): pp. 7-24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>

¹² Young, "Memory/Monument," p. 238

Sir Richard Westmacott's depiction of Charles James Fox sits within Westminster Abbey. This sculpture depicts Fox in a prone position, supported by an allegory of Liberty with figures representing Peace and a slave kneeling at his feet.¹³ Fox was consistent in his position against slavery throughout his life and proposed the 1807 Slave Trade Act.¹⁴ Situated within a religiously sacred site, the monument helps to perpetuate ideas of British defined freedom. As the figure of Liberty cradles Fox, she comforts him, suggesting a sense of gratitude. The mourning figure of Peace hints at Fox's death being detrimental to global progress towards harmony and reconciliation. The inclusion of Peace also can be linked to the beginnings of humanitarian interventionism which British politicians strove to enshrine as a key, traditional and innate British value in the years following the abolition of slavery. Furthermore, the inclusion of a grieving slave figure removes any guilt from the memory of Fox, as he is championed by the previously enslaved. This figure also suggests thankfulness and credits Fox as an emancipator. The monument is a clear example of a commission used to depict one of the period's politicians as a civilising force.¹⁵

Elsewhere, inscriptions were utilised alongside sculpted symbols to further advocate the abolitionists of the period. Also within Westminster Abbey, is the memorial tablet dedicated to Granville Sharp. Including both emotive motifs and language, Sharp's table portrays him in profile, a praying chained slave, a lion with a lamb and a large body of text which celebrates his memory.¹⁶ Whilst the portrayal of an enslaved individual directly communicates Sharp's relationship with anti-slavery movements, a more subtle symbolic power relationship is represented by animal imagery. The lion,

¹³ "Charles James Fox & Henry V. Fox, Lord Holland," Westminster Abbey, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/charles-james-fox-henry-v-fox-lord-holland>)

¹⁴ "Past Foreign Secretaries: Charles James Fox," GOV.UK, accessed 13 January 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-foreign-secretaries/charles-fox>)

The 1807 Slave Trade Act was an Act of the British Parliament forbidding the trade of slaves in the British Empire. It did not abolish the practice of slavery itself, which occurred in 1833 with the Slavery Abolition Act, but was used as political leverage to encourage other nations into abolishing their slave trades. The 1807 Act worked using a fine per enslaved person found upon a ship system, which often led captains to throw captured slaves overboard to avoid payment.

¹⁵ Tyrrell and Walvin, "Whose History Is It?"

¹⁶ "Granville Sharp," Westminster Abbey, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/granville-sharp>)

connoting strength and wider British power, contrasts with the fragility and helplessness of the lamb. This dichotomy reflects the power dynamic that was imposed onto both enslaved and, later, liberated peoples. Equating those in slavery to the lamb in this image furthers the notion that slaves were 'helpless victims in need of rescue'.¹⁷ In addition, the inscription also attempts to tailor British history by promoting a particular common memory. The inscription details Sharp's desire to 'rescue his ... country from the guilt ... by employing the arm of freedom to rivet the fetters of bondage'.¹⁸ Again, the redemption of British national identity is his motivator, rather than the alleviation the suffering of enslaved peoples. Pat McLernon and Sue Griffiths describe this as 'convenient amnesia', since morally questionable issues are neglected in both local and national memory.¹⁹ In this case, anti-slavery movements and emancipation were used to define British national and imperial morality and promote its commitment to humanitarian traditions.

Another Westminster Abbey statue that uses these same techniques to mould the narrative surrounding slavery is that of Zachary Macaulay. His bust was sculpted in 1842, after the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, and features a centralised medallion with the iconic 'Am I not a man a brother?' kneeling slave image alongside another 'self-congratulating' description.²⁰ The image of the helpless slave requiring Macaulay's assistance places the role of abolitionist at the fore. The positioning of the medallion also suggests Macaulay is centrally important to both the anti-slavery movements and British progress. In the accompanying inscription, Macaulay is credited with having 'rescued the British Empire from the guilt of the slave trade' and similar language is used to create anti-slavery as a British-owned

¹⁷ Tyrrell and Walvin, "Whose History Is It?" p.158

¹⁸ "Granville Sharp," Westminster Abbey

¹⁹ Pat McLernon and Sue Griffiths, "Liverpool and the Heritage of the Slave Trade," in *The Construction of Built Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2018) p.204

²⁰ Madge Dresser, "Set in Stone? Statues and Slavery in London," *History Workshop Journal* 64, no. 1 (2007): pp. 162-199, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbm032> p.164; "Zachary Macaulay," Westminster Abbey, accessed 10 January 2020,

<https://www.westminster-abbey.org/abbey-commemorations/commemorations/zachary-macaulay>

The 'Am I not a man a brother?' image was created by Josiah Wedgwood, renowned potter and friend of abolitionist Thomas Clarkson. The image of a kneeling slave in chains with the inscription was widely reproduced on domestic objects and fashion accessories throughout the eighteenth century and soon became the one of the most famous antislavery image in Britain.

movement.²¹ Lowenthal describes this process as ‘domesticating the past to make it truly ours’, a method which allows for the creation of particular legacies and memories.²² He also raises the importance of clothing, highlighting that heroes are commonly depicted wearing anachronistic dress which calls back to ancient eras.²³ Macaulay’s bust is an example of this, portrayed in Roman dress he evokes ideas of statesmanship and wisdom. Wilberforce, Clarkson, Fowell Buxton and Murray are also commemorated in Westminster Abbey using similar language, imagery and symbolism.

Unveiled in 1834 and standing 110 ft high, the Wilberforce Monument in Hull celebrates Wilberforce’s role in securing the abolition of the slave trade.²⁴ The elevated height of the column situates Wilberforce above the common person, reinforcing his excellence as a man and a leader. Whilst Westminster Abbey evokes ideas of national patronage and sanctity, the Wilberforce Monument in Hull is important due to its locally recognised heritage value.²⁵ The inscription on the side which reads ‘erected by voluntary subscription’ furthers the idea as he is enshrined as a distinguished man of the people.²⁶ Standing at the top of the column, Wilberforce is depicted in military clothing, aligning him with other British leaders and protectors. The use of Wilberforce in commemorative works also helps to build a personality within the narrative of British anti-slavery.²⁷ Having a nationally renowned individual’s identity woven into a constructed mythology is beneficial, as their celebration can be used to generate a collective memory and national storyline which prioritises success over unsavoury national failure.

Other monuments similarly continue this theme of commemoration of personalities, pushing a unified memory of anti-slavery. In Wisbech, the Clarkson Memorial, erected in 1881, pays homage to Thomas Clarkson, Sharp and Wilberforce.²⁸ Whilst this memorial is primarily dedicated to Clarkson, the use of a trio of

²¹ Ibid.

²² David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) p. 503

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Wilberforce Monument,” Historic England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1283041>

²⁵ G. J. Ashworth, “The Experience of Heritage Conservation: Outcomes and Futures,” in *The Construction of Built Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2018)

²⁶ “Wilberforce Monument,” Historic England

²⁷ Oldfield, 'Chords of Freedom'

²⁸ “Clarkson Memorial,” Historic England, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1228597>

abolitionists suggests a religious aspect to the commemoration. Here, the triad of politicians can be likened to the Holy Trinity, promoting their work as wholly moral and great. The statue of Clarkson is depicted in Roman drapery, again alluding to the grandeur and longevity of his politics. In addition, he holds a scroll and broken fetters in each hand. The scroll reinforces the ideas of intellect and wisdom which his clothing suggests whilst the broken chains signify Clarkson's personal role and responsibility for the end of slavery. A 'suppliant slave' is depicted on the last of the panels.²⁹ Clarkson's Memorial also has local connections and drives the celebration of a local hero who encapsulated 'national ideals and triumphs' of the nineteenth century.³⁰

Another way in which monuments have contributed to the problematic memory of slavery in Britain is through the celebration of British commerce without tackling the issue of where such wealth was derived. Examples of this include the statues of William Beckford in London's Guildhall and Robert Milligan in West India Quay.³¹ The statue of Milligan has now been removed as a result of the combined efforts of the Canal and River Trust and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, an event which happened only days after a statue of Edward Colston was toppled by protesters in Bristol. The London based statues of Beckford and Milligan depict figures of Britannia and Commerce in celebration of British growth, wealth and success. Their inclusion establishes an innate connection between Britishness and progress, but ignores the experiences of the exploited enslaved. These statues demonstrate how the past can be manipulated in order to fit better with a nation's 'self-images and aspirations'.³² In addition to the shared symbolism, the statue of Milligan also includes shipping and religious imagery, hinting at God-supported trade. Milligan was a key figure in the development of the West India Docks, where goods arrived in London having been transported from plantations.³³ Beckford is depicted as a man of luxury and an 'upholder of civic liberty' which seems ironic given his ownership of over 3,000 Africans on his Jamaican plantations.³⁴ The locations of these statues are also significant as both the docks of east London and the Guildhall had close ties to the exploitation of enslaved peoples.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Young, "Memory/Monument," p.235

³¹ Dresser, "Set in Stone?" pp. 172-179

³² Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited* p. 502

³³ Dresser, "Set in Stone?"

³⁴ Ibid. p.174

In the late twentieth century, there was increasing pressure for places associated with the slave trade to recognise where their historic wealth was derived from.³⁵ This led to a series of exhibitions and pamphlets, but ‘the human toll of transatlantic slavery’ still received little ‘attention in broadly accessible public forms’, such as sculpture and monument.³⁶ There is a lack of commemoration of the agency and rebellion of slaves (insurgency occurred on around 10% of all slave ships, regardless of the size of the crew).³⁷ In 2005, Kevin Dalton Johnson’s sculpture ‘*Captured Africans*’ was unveiled on St. Georges Quay in Lancaster memorialising slaves who were transported on ships out of Lancaster.³⁸ It turns a commemorative focus to the lives and experiences of those who were brought into slavery and travelled the Middle Passage. Each layer represents a different aspect of slavery--commodities such as sugar and cotton, the mass wealth produced and the slaves themselves.³⁹ Dalton’s work generates reflection on the human cost of transatlantic slavery. In 2008, a sculpture commemorating the bicentenary of the 1807 Slave Trade Act was unveiled in London’s Fen Court. The work is the combined effort of Michael Visocchi and Lemn Sissay, who used their skills as a sculptor and poet respectively to create a group of ‘sugar cane’ columns crowded in front of a pulpit, suggesting an auction.⁴⁰ The columns are accompanied by Sissay’s poem, ‘The Gilt of Cain’ which combines the language of the stock exchange with references to the Old Testament.⁴¹ Despite the allusion to the auction of enslaved people, the poem ends with a celebration of Wilberforce, which shifts the focus to the role of the abolitionist rather than the experiences of those enslaved. Whilst this might be expected for a monument dedicated to the 200-year anniversary of the ending of the trade of slaves, it could be argued that the monument misses an opportunity to emphasise the human injustice and suffering before the abolition.

³⁵ Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *The British Slave Trade and Public Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006)

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.207

³⁷ Bernard Bailyn, “Considering the Slave Trade: History and Memory,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (January 2001): pp. 245-252, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2674426> p. 246

³⁸ “*Captured Africans*,” *Age of Revolution*, <https://ageofrevolution.org/200-object/captured-africans/>)

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ “*Slave Trade Memorials*,” *Historic England*, accessed 10 January 2020, <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/sites-of-memory/ending-slavery/slave-trade-memorials/>)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

In December of 2019, *Memorial2007*, a group campaigning for the 'first national memorial ... to commemorate enslaved Africans and their descendants', failed to secure funding for the new monument.⁴² Despite public support and the securing of approval to build in Hyde Park, the lack of financial aid has meant the planning permission will soon lapse, pushing the construction of a monument specifically dedicated to the remembrance of enslaved people further into the future.⁴³ Whilst the construction of statue is not the only way in which the legacy of slavery within the British Empire can be reimaged and recontextualised, shifting its focus from the elite few to a wider, more inclusive and reflective narrative, it is an important indicator of progress. The permanence and solidity of statue are properties that a protest or book cannot replicate and, arguably, enshrining a new form of remembrance using monument promotes not only the willingness and commitment to open dialogues about slavery but also provides accountability and the recognition of culpability, which is currently missing.

The importance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century monuments must be considered in today's context. Whilst it is apparent that Britain is no longer a slave society with institutional channels dedicated to its support, the monuments that remain in place are problematic as they call back to the constructed narratives of previous governments, reinforcing their legitimacy. Regardless of when they were constructed, 'monuments ... help define the meaning of the past and ... how it should be remembered' and these memorial sites promote only one version of the history which does not reflect the realities of British involvement in slavery.⁴⁴ Despite attempts to commemorate those who suffered in British-led slavery, the newer monuments are too few in number and too limited to be considered satisfactory and to eliminate the emphasis on the role and successes of white abolitionist men. As late as 1996, when Thomas Clarkson had a memorial plaque placed in Westminster Abbey, the Bishop of Ely asked the British public to honour the role of abolitionists and 'to recognise that their story still forms part of a metanarrative of national identity in which Britain had shown the way to social and moral

⁴² "About," Memorial 2007, <http://www.memorial2007.org.uk/about>

⁴³ Robert Booth, "UK Government Refuses to Fund Slavery Memorial Endorsed by Johnson in 2008," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, December 10, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/10/slave-trade-memorial-charity-uk-government-refusal-of-funding-boris-johnson>

⁴⁴ Oldfield, 'Chords of Freedom' p.56

progress'.⁴⁵ However, over the last few months, there has been increased support for the removal of statues, the renaming of streets and the decolonisation of curricula. Significant progress has been made through the removal of figures such as Robert Milligan and Edward Coulson from their plinths. There has also been a series of reviews launched which aim to evaluate a range of monuments, street names and memorial plaques in relation to their potential connections to slavery. This will be undertaken in London, Manchester and by local Labour councils.⁴⁶ Removal is one step in the right direction, but there must also be careful and inclusive consideration as to whose voices and stories replace the previous narrative. Public sculpture such as 'I am Queen Mary' by La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers subverts colonial tools and recognises the power of every day resistance and local rebellion whilst at the same time being collaborative and derived from the artists' own experiences, placing agency at the forefront of both the historical and the present day importance of the monument.⁴⁷ Projects such as this are key for establishing a meaningful conversation between impacted communities and future monuments. Such diverse collaborative efforts should allow previously excluded peoples to see themselves represented within British public heritage. Arguably, this should be at the foreground of the recontextualisation of the remembrance slavery.

⁴⁵ Tyrrell and Walvin, "Whose History Is It?" p.14

⁴⁶ Rowena Mason and Helen Pidd, "Labour Councils Launch Slavery Statue Review as Another Is Removed," June 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/09/sadiq-khan-orders-review-of-all-london-statues-for-slavery-links>.

⁴⁷ Martin Selsoe Sorensen, "Denmark Gets First Public Statue of a Black Woman, a 'Rebel Queen'," March 31, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/world/europe/denmark-statue-black-woman.html>.