

Legacies of Enslavement Inquiry and Exhibition at Queens' College, Cambridge

Dr Tim Eggington

Fellow Librarian, Queen's College, University of Oxford, UK

The University of Cambridge Legacies of Enslavement inquiry was instigated in 2019, in the wake of growing public interest in the issue of British universities' historical links to enslavement.[1] Yet this story of enslavement could not be told without input from the university's colleges. It was partly with that in mind that a subsequent Queens' Governing Body meeting invited the college's librarian and historians to conduct an inquiry into Queens' College's legacies of enslavement.

Following much discussion between students and fellows, it was agreed that all interested Queens' members would participate in a wide-ranging project to examine the biographies of as many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Queens' members as possible. Given that it was not until the lockdown in March 2020 that work began, the library team drew up guidelines so that students, fellows, and librarians could do the research from home. Researchers picked names from the Cambridge Alumni Database,[2] researched them on UCL's Legacies of British Slavery database,[3] and many other similar resources, and entered their findings

[1] University of Cambridge, "Advisory Group on Legacies of Enslavement Final Report, published September 22, 2022," <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/legacies-of-enslavement-inquiry>.

[2] University of Cambridge, "A Cambridge Alumni Database" accessed April 27, 2023, <https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/>.

[3] University College London, "Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery," accessed April 27, 2023. <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>.

onto a shared Google Docs spreadsheet.[4] By Autumn 2020, a coherent picture was emerging, and the library pressed ahead with its planned ‘Legacies of Enslavement’ exhibition, whilst continuing with archival and biographical enslavement research.

What had we discovered? There were in fact no big endowments relating to enslavement, nor was there anything of such symbolic significance as the slave plantation bell at St Catherine’s[5] or the Benin Bronzes at Jesus.[6] What we did find was that the college’s connections were extensive and multifarious. We discovered, for example, Peter Moncrieffe who matriculated at Queens’ in 1829 as one of the university’s first, if not the first, Black student.[7] His grandmother (called Milborough) had, it seems, been enslaved in Jamaica where Peter Moncrieffe eventually returned to become a judge and member of the Jamaican Legislative Council.[8] Peter Moncrieffe was one of hundreds of Queens’ students who progressed to careers in the empire, as merchants, planters, administrators, commentators, clerics, and much else. It seems likely that many, if not most who went to the Americas would have interacted with enslavement in some shape or form. Out of the 2,000 people who were Queens’ members between 1700 and 1833, thirty-five students have been identified whose families had actively benefitted financially from slave holdings in the Americas.[9] It seems likely that

[4] Queens’ College Cambridge, “Legacies of Enslavement at Queens’ College: Research Data,” accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.queensoldlibrary.org/Legacies-of-Enslavement>.

[5] St Catherine’s College, Cambridge, “Bell Continues to Support an Honest Approach to the Legacies of Enslavement,” published May 18, 2021, <https://www.caths.cam.ac.uk/slavery-exhibition>.

[6] Jesus College, Cambridge, “Jesus College Returns Benin Bronze in World First,” posted October, 27, 2021, <https://www.jesus.cam.ac.uk/articles/jesus-college-returns-benin-bronze-world-first>.

[7] University College London, “Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery.”

[8] Jamaican Family Search Genealogy Research Library, “1861 Almanac: Who’s Who? In Which Is Incorporated the Jamaica Almanac,” accessed May 1, 2023, <http://www.jamaicanfamilysearch.com/Members/al61c01.htm>

[9] Queens’ College Cambridge, “Legacies of Enslavement at Queens’ College.”

there would have been more. As Fellow Commoners, these members donated library books and other gifts, and helped to finance the college through their fees, which in turn laundered their family wealth into status and career opportunities facilitated through their association with Cambridge. It was, however, as an institution whose main task was to train Anglican clerics that Queens' became most famously associated with enslavement and, of course, abolitionism.

Previous histories of Queens' College have alluded to enslavement, if at all, in relation to the college's stance in support of abolition.[10] The full picture is, perhaps inevitably, more complex, and our initial expectation was that our inquiry and exhibition would focus more fully on those who actively promoted and benefitted from the slave trade. In reality, however, the interrelated roles of abolitionism, Christianity, and more specifically, Anglicanism proved to be both unavoidable and central to our story.

Evangelical Anglicans such as William Wilberforce saw enslavement as a sin against God and Man, denying the possibility of salvation to enslaved people and placing Britain in spiritual danger.[11] Late eighteenth-century Queens' was a hotbed of evangelical Anglicanism. Its president, Isaac Milner (1750–1820), was a close friend of Wilberforce with whom he shared the same agenda for moral reform at home and abroad.[12] Just one example of their worldview can be seen in the African Institution, an organisation headed by abolitionists including Wilberforce, to which numerous Queens' members paid subscription fees, whilst others played leading roles in its affairs.[13] Following the Abolition bill of 1807,

[10] John Twigg, *A History of Queens' College Cambridge 1448–1986* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1986), 269–70.

[11] William Wilberforce, *A letter on the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1807).

[12] Gareth Atkins, *Converting Britannia: Evangelicals and British Public Life, 1770–1840* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019), Chapter 1.

[13] Queens' College Cambridge. "Legacies of Enslavement at Queens' College."

the African Institution announced its intention to promote “civilisation and happiness” in Africa as a means to “repair” “those enormous wrongs which the natives of Africa” had endured.[14] A key objective was to relocate freed slaves from the Americas to Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa. Enthusiasts for this plan envisaged a Christian dominion with a thriving economy, under British rule, that would form a blueprint for the “civilisation” of Africa.[15]

Former Queens’ student and Fellow, Thomas Perronet Thompson, was fully signed-up to this agenda when he was appointed as crown governor of the colony in 1808.[16] Yet, the situation he encountered on his arrival offended Thompson’s sense of morality and justice. Debauchery amongst colonial administrators and the practice of selling “freed” slaves into forced “apprenticeship” seemed contrary to the African Institution’s high-minded mission. His complaints to the Government at home led to his swift removal from the post thanks to lobbying by Wilberforce who saw in Thompson an obstacle to the African Institution’s wider plan for Africa. Thompson went on to a long career as a radical MP, was a leading activist in the Anti-Corn Law League, and a commentator on issues we might nowadays consider progressive. Yet it is likely that we see at least something of his perspective on the former slaves and Africa in the words of his mentor and supporter, the abolitionist President of Queens’, Isaac Milner. He described Thompson’s Africa project as a “rational” attempt by “religious people to spread Christianity, and to civilise barbarians.”[17] Such statements reflect not only the reforming ambitions of abolitionists but also their sense of cultural superiority, a combination that serves to underline how antislavery could itself drive British imperial expansion.

[14] African Institution, *Report of the Committee of the African Institution* (London: William Phillips and George Yard, 1807).

[15] Atkins, *Converting Britannia*, Chapter 4.

[16] Padraic X. Scanlan, *Freedom’s Debtors: British Antislavery in Sierra Leone in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2017), Chapter 4

[17] Mary Milner, *The life of Isaac Milner...Dean of Carlisle, President of Queen’s College* (London: John W. Parker, 1842) 356.

There are many further manifestations of this worldview evident in the actions of Queens' members who pursued careers overseas. One such is the remarkable career of the African-American minister, abolitionist, and African nationalist, Alexander Crummell. He graduated from Queens' in 1853 as the University's first recorded Black graduate. His ferocious criticisms of institutional discrimination against Black Americans, as well as his writings on Black self-reliance,[18] have made him one of the college's more influential alumni. It seems likely to have been, in part, the college's abolitionist reputation that attracted him to Queens' in the first place.[19] Clearly, Crummell would have opposed British imperialism in Africa, but he too was very much motivated by the idea that Africa could be civilised through exposure to Protestant Christianity and European ideas.[20]

These are some of the stories that were told through our exhibition, associated events, and the exhibition booklet.[21] During the five months it was open (October 2022–March 2023) there were over 1,400 visits to the exhibition and associated events. Visitors included school groups, students, academics, and the general public. Many engaged the curators in conversation, revisited several times, and left feedback that suggested that they appreciated the points the exhibition sought to make. An extended online version of the exhibition and its accompanying booklet is accessible via the Queens' old library website.[22] In addition, and very importantly, all the research data about college members linked to enslavement has been made available via the same website and we hope very much that this will serve as a basis for future research.[23]

[18] Alexander Crummell, "Sermon XX, The Destined Superiority of the Negro. A Thanksgiving Discourse, 1877, Isaiah 67, 7" In *The Greatness of Christ and Other Sermons* (New York: T. Whitaker, 1882), 344-352

[19] Twigg, *A History of Queens' College Cambridge 1448–1986*, 270.

[20] Alexander Crummell, *The Duty of a Rising Christian State* (London: Wertheim and Macintosh, 1856).

[21] & [22] Queens' College Cambridge, "Enslavement & Salvation at Queens' College: Old Library Exhibition," accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.queensoldlibrary.org/Exhibitions/Enslavement-Salvation>.

[23] Queens' College Cambridge, "Enslavement & Salvation at Queens' College."

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