

The Race and Ethnicity Hub

Black representation in Glasgow's Press – 1830 1870 anti-abolitionism

Pauline Brown:

OK, well my name's Pauline Brown. And I'm an MA student with the OU. And I just want to give a little bit of background to how I got here studying this. I'm from Brixton in London, originally. My parents were from the Windrush generation. And I'm the first generation of Windrush parentage.

I came to Scotland 27 years ago and have spent over 25 years working in social justice as a equality and diversity consultant. I also worked as a race equality officer with Glasgow City Council with their Education Department. So as a social justice officer and equality consultant, I've worked with everybody, from the Scottish government, all the local authorities in Scotland, the NHS, the police, and financial institutions such as JPMorgan and the Royal Bank of Scotland.

So it was my work as a social justice officer that developed an interest in challenging racism that led me to look at how we got to this place in our history, and developed an interest in the history of the slave trade in Glasgow particularly. I was asked to run the Black History Tour, which I ran from 2003 to 2007. Glasgow historians began looking seriously into the subject of the history of the enslaved African in about 2006, and also looking at acknowledging their links with the slave trade. And out of this interest, I decided to do a history degree with the OU. And here I am now, doing my masters.

So, my dissertation is entitled, "Black People and the African Diaspora as a Subject and a Concept in a Sampling of Glasgow [AUDIO OUT] 1833 to 1870." I'll just move this on to look at why I've chosen that time period. It represents the emancipation of the enslaved African in the British colonies in 1833. And it also covers the end of the slave trade in the Americas in 1865. So that's really why I have chosen that time period to have a look at how Black people were represented in the Glasgow press.

It also represents Britain's imperial expansion into Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand, and how the indigenous communities were viewed during this time frame. Why this research will be useful? Well, this has been a very interesting year. And in fact, I started the

masters in early May. And then on the 25th of May, George Floyd was killed in America and the Black Lives Matters exploded onto our television screens and into our awareness.

Black Lives Matters has raised a heightened awareness of the part that our history has played and continues to play in social justice. My research will help to explain how we got to where we are in the 21st century. That is probably my keenest interest in terms of looking at the history of slavery and the history of enslaved people. The legacy and the legacy that this has left. So, I'm looking at how we got here in the 21st century by exploring that the fairly recent past 19th century to understand what the West of Scotland was exposed to in that period.

I want to see how this may have helped shaped its attitudes to Black people despite there being very few Black people in Scotland or Glasgow. I want to outline the context and then look at the ways in which historians have presented the past Scotland's hidden history. The Glasgow Herald in April 1832 notes Scotland's hidden history and connections with the slave trade by saying the loss of the North American colonies inflicted the greatest distress on Glasgow, which was not relieved until an intercourse was opened up with the West Indian colonists. It went on to add, the West Indian trade contributed to raise this city to such a state in the scale of the empire.

Scotland considered itself during the 19th century the second city of the empire. Like many of the European nations that profited from slavery, Britain began to distance itself from its difficult past. But Scotland went one step further and began to deny any involvement in the slave trade or slavery at South. This was until the last 15 or so years. Glasgow's attitude from the late 19th century up to early 21st century was that It Wisnae Us. And one of the early historians writing about the slave trade in Glasgow, that was the title of this book. The denial was concrete and complete.

Because very few slave ships sailed from Scottish docks, Scotland has been able to hide its extensive links with the slave trade. Despite the fact that the 19th century press is so full of articles that show that link and connection, such as the news from all of the British colonies. When I started my studies, I was anxious that there may not be enough material, but the difficulty I have is the overwhelming amount of material and how I make use appropriately of that. So, the Jamaica House of Assembly was reported on in a similar way to the House of Commons or the House of Lords. A mail from the British colonies was often more reliable than from the mainland.

Scotland's trades with the British and Caribbean columnist included tobacco, sugar, cotton, and linen, indigo, and swordfish, dried salted fish of the poorest quality, but would have been thrown away before its use as cheap protein for the enslaved was recognized. In fact, in Jamaica, swordfish and ackee is still now our national dish, a legacy from the slave trades.

Glasgow's street names also reflect its links with the colonies, India Street, Jamaica Street, Virginia Street, as well as the streets that were named after prominent tobacco merchants, Ingram Street, Oswald Street, Buchanan Street, Glassford Street.

Glasgow still has the old tobacco merchants house in Miller Street, a building erected in the 18th century. And its gallery of Modern Art is the former country mansion of the slave owner, William Cunningham.

How historians reported Glasgow's history of abolition. Glasgow has a long and well-documented history of abolitionism. Yes, it's very much celebrated in key abolitionists, so some of the names on the slides that you have that referenced Ralph Wordlaw, Zachary MacAulay. Much has been written about these abolitionists by scholars and they have become, if you like, the Scottish equivalent of William Wilberforce.

The 16-year-old Zachary MacAulay had been in Jamaica in early 1785. Initially shocked by the brutality of the system, he likened it to be a hell itself, but he became inured to it. And writing in a letter to his fiancé that he had become callous and indifferent as this was necessary to manage his role as an overseer.

However, it must have had a key impact on him as he became a very important figure in the Emancipation Movement and is one of what's known as the Clapham Sect Scots, who moved to South London and helped direct the abolition movement nationwide. Many well-known abolitionists such as George Thompson and James Ramsay visited Scotland and Glasgow frequently as did Frederick Douglass, a well-known American abolitionist who lived in Edinburgh for a period of time during the 1860s. He spent a lot of his time challenging the slavery in America and fighting for emancipation of the American slaves. If he'd gone back to America, he may well have been re-enslaved.

Scotland was more enthusiastic for emancipation, particularly in the 18th century. And they sent more petitions to parliament pro-rata for the abolition of slavery than England, Ireland, or Wales. So, Scotland played a key part in securing emancipation of the enslaved in 1833. However, many Scottish people are represented in the British legacies of slave owners having received compensation for the loss of their property on emancipation.

And again, the street names and university buildings reflect some of these people. Scottish MPs such as James Ewen and Sir John Maxwell, the name of the Maxwell as is reflected all over the South side of Glasgow. And in fact, that was the family the Maxwell's that gifted the city public park, which houses B Barrow Collection, very famous country park in the heart of the city.

The Maxwells received over 12,000 pounds compensation, which would be the equivalent of 1,305, 000 today. So, the 19th century press is full of the stories of the considerable sums that Britain spent policing the abolition of the slave trade. Once they abolished Atlantic slavery in 1837, Britain took on a key role in patrolling the West African coast with a base, Sierra Leone, which they policed the coast trying to stop the slave trade from the other countries that continued into practice. And there is a lot in the press on this as it almost sought to congratulate themselves on that important and significant role.

So, a lot of money was spent trying to control the slave trade and to stop countries like Cuba and Brazil practicing the continued enslavement. These nations did not abolish slavery until much later in the 19th century. As I said, these activities are presented in a self-congratulatory way in the 19th century. And Britain highlights this role rather than the fact that up until the abolition of slavery, it had been the biggest nation of enslaved people. There is little acknowledgment of the role that Black people would have played in their own emancipation, through resistance, through insurrection, and absconding.

And historians in Scotland have documented a piece on slaves who absconded and removed themselves from their owners in the 18th century. The youngest of which was a nine-year-old boy. That reflected the centuries trend for young Black males as a status symbol. And John Glass, which I mentioned earlier. There is a portrait of the glass of the family in one of Glasgow's museums that has a picture of a little Black boy standing behind the family. And also, in the people's palace a museum in Glasgow, there is a silver chain and colour engraved that would have been used on one of the little Black boys that were around the city in the 18th century.

So, I wanted to focus this piece on Glasgow's history of anti-abolition. The history of abolition is very extensive and well-known but there is the history of anti-abolition that is not so readily well-known and Glasgow prides itself on its abolitionist history. Scholars that choose Tom Devine has suggested that whilst anti-abolitionism was for the most part concentrated on the slave and ports of Bristol, Liverpool, and London, in Scotland petitions to delay or abandon abolition were generated across several regions, most predictably Glasgow.

Glasgow's West Indian Association was the key player in the anti-abolitionist activities. Many of the members of this association will be the people who have streets named after them or are venerated with statues or university buildings. Yet, the attitudes reflected in 19th century press and the contribution they have made to attitudes that have prevailed today are frequently overlooked. One of the historians writing about the history of Black people in Britain has said, it would be hard to understand the negativity of the 19th century attitude to Black skin.

The West Indian Association in Glasgow had James McQueen as its key mouthpiece. He was the editor of a newspaper called the Glasgow Career. He was the editor and owner, part proprietor, so a key player. He was vociferous in his arguments to keep slavery and vociferous in his pro-slavery attitude. He kept up a spirited defense of the rights of the West Indian planters to their property and the denial of the rights of African people. He was considered quite famous in the city for his work and he was considered very aggressive towards the abolitionists.

The themes that he presented re-empty abolition weren't that-- the slave trade was encouraged by parliamentary act; therefore, people had the right to it. The rights of the slaves who had invested capital in the colonies following these acts and the loss of their property was paramount. The financial loss for the nation and the impact on the British economy and the fact that the enslaved needed guidance and support as they were ill prepared to fend for themselves. James McQueen wrote a scurrilous review of Mary Prince's the history of Mary Prince, a West Indian slave.

This was published in 1831. And he said that sympathy should be with Mary Prince's owner, who had been defamed by her portrayal of plantation life. And that she should be grateful that she had been brought to England. Mr. Pringle, the publisher of Mary Prince's autobiography took Black Blackwood's magazine. They were the magazine that printed the article. He took them to court and won five pounds for libel. And this article was published in the Glasgow Herald. That five pounds would be worth 522 pounds in today's money.

As you can see on the slide, James McQueen writing on a tour from the West India's in support of the planters has written. The mother country has been ungenerous to planters. They have chosen the moment of severest distress to crown their crude laws down your throat. The British government will lose but you cannot lose face. You must plead your case with your King. And in fact, the planters did go to the King to plead their case to keep slavery.

So, James McQueen was paid-- let me just move this on. He was paid handsomely by the West Indian Association. He spent a lot of time denying that he was being paid by them, but eventually, it emerged that he was paid very well by them. He tried to portray his views as just coming from himself. But he also believed that Black people were less than human. And as a young man, he'd worked as an overseer on a plantation in Grenada. That experience had left him with robust pro-slavery views. And he never lost the belief that Black people were inferior to whites.

Newspaper articles reveal a tour of the West Indies that McQueen undertook during 1832 to 1833. And he never failed to highlight the plight of the poor planters. And the quote that's on screen. This is from the Grenada free press that was printed in the Glasgow Herald, where he

was being feted around the British Caribbean as representing the planters and trying to be a vociferous voice for them. So, what began as a trickle. Of articles in 1830 and 1831 became an avalanche during 1832 right up to abolition and beyond.

The Glasgow Herald was considered less vociferous in its condemnation of abolition than papers like the Glasgow Career would have been. Nevertheless, it also contributed to anti-abolitionist rhetoric. And the Glasgow Herald felt the planters were being treated very badly by the anti-colonial British government. One example that was in the papers of this bad treatment was the suicide of a West Indian merchant Duncan Brown Esquire, who had constantly been anxious and ruminating about the West Indian questions and the state of its affairs. It will be utter ruin and the government has treated us badly. He felt that the government were robbing him and other large proprietors.

In light of government decisions, his agent in Glasgow had made demands he was unable to meet. This further upset and depressed him, and he destroyed himself in a state of temporary derangement. This article would have been presented in the papers as the fault of the government and the abolitionists for driving West Indians to such a place. The largest numbers of Scottish West Indians would have been absent landlords what was known as soul journeys. They managed and owned planters, but they would have lived predominantly in the UK like Duncan Brown.

The anti-abolitionist movement was as strong and as not quite as powerful as the abolitionist movement, but it was there and it's a part that Glasgow seems keen to forget. Despite their keen involvement in the abolitionist movement, there were many individuals keen to see the status quo continue. During the build up to the slavery abolition bill 1833, the anti-abolitionists became more frantic in their approach moving usually from one article per newspaper to one on each page. The press slaves were predominantly interested parties such as the Glasgow West Indian Association but also more moderate men who recognized the value of the slave trade to Glasgow's economic status were participating in this pro-slavery campaign.

Their arguments, again, were rooted in the economic need for cheap labour. Many historians argue that the slave trade was racialized to justify its existence. The trade came first then the hierarchy of races and the attitudes came to justify. Many believed the African, the enslaved African to be inferior and needing European guidance to become civilized. And this is one of the key things that I found in the 19th century press, the level of belief that Black people aren't inferior and need European involvement to civilize them.

So, this idea that Black Lives don't matter, or Black people are not as important as whites, I've seen three different newspaper articles that have the memorable quote, two Blacks don't make a white. So, this is an idea that has been well-documented amongst the press. And

also, the ways that indigenous communities are discussed in the 19th century press. These ideas, that people of colour are not as valuable, has been ingrained in our society for over 400 years. My hope is that my research will help us better understand how we got to this place and how these ideas continue to be perpetuated and continue to blight lives. Thank you.

[MUSIC PLAYING]