

Modern history | Book Review

## Made in Britain

The economic and cultural legacies of slavery

By [Krishan Kumar](#)



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British colonists served by enslaved Africans at a ball in Spanish Town, Jamaica, unsigned print, 1802

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### IN THIS REVIEW

#### SLAVE EMPIRE

How slavery built modern Britain  
464pp. Robinson. £25.

Padraic X. Scanlan

### THE INTEREST

How the British establishment resisted the abolition of slavery

400pp. Bodley Head. £20.

Michael Taylor

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### THE NEW AGE OF EMPIRE

How racism and colonialism still rule the world

288pp. Allen Lane. £20.

Kehinde Andrews

**W**hat do the following have in common? Graham Greene and George Orwell. The founders of Barclays and Lloyds. The accounting firms Deloitte and PricewaterhouseCoopers. The insurance companies Royal Sun Alliance and Indemnity Mutual Marine (Aviva). The former Lord Chancellors Douglas Hogg and Quintin Hogg (Lord Hailsham). The former Prime Minister David Cameron and his wife Samantha. The family of the Earls of Harewood, and the Holland-Hibberts family (the Viscounts Knutsford). The Oxford biologist Richard Dawkins and the writer Marina Warner. The Codrington Library of All Souls College, Oxford. The Universities of Cambridge and Glasgow. The Bank of England, the British Museum, the National Gallery and the National Trust.

You will know the answer of course, especially after the many museum exhibitions, community events, educational initiatives, and mass media discussions that took place in 2007, the bicentenary of the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The families of these individuals, and the founders and benefactors of these institutions, had all originally derived their wealth and standing from slave- holding, together with the generous compensation - £20 million, calculated as around £1.8 billion in today's money, or over £76 billion if seen as an equivalent proportion of GDP - that was paid to slave- owners when slavery was abolished in the British Caribbean in 1833 (the largest payout ever by the British state until the banking rescue package of 2008). And this is of course only the tip of the iceberg, the names that titillated the public when the matter was being aired. For those who wanted to learn more, the best resource was and is the ["Legacies of British Slave-Ownership" database](#), a prosopography compiled and managed by Nicholas Draper, Catherine Hall and others at University College London. Nicholas Draper's *The Price of Emancipation* (2010) laid out impressively the details of the over 40,000 awards to individuals who were compensated after 1834, showing that they represented a good cross-section of British society; and Catherine Hall and others drew out the full implications of the settlement, along with much other material on slavery's contribution to the development of modern British society, in their *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial slavery and the formation of Victorian Britain* (2014). From this and other publications from the UCL group you might think that slavery had been the main building block of modern Britain (the opium trade, according to Amitav Ghosh and others, is another powerful contender). Slavery - Black slavery - seems to have penetrated every nook and cranny of British society, working its effect long after its supposed demise. "Britons make it; it makes Britons", ran the old Shredded Wheat advertisement. Now perhaps one could say, of slavery, "Britain made it; it made Britain".

Unlike the Americans, who have always been reminded of slavery by the fact that it happened on their soil, and by the 13 per cent or so of their population who are Black, the British for quite some time after abolition

suppressed slavery in the collective memory. Forgetting, especially of discreditable episodes, as Ernest Renan said in his famous lecture, “What is the Nation?” (1882), is as essential to a nation as remembering. The British were content to bury slavery as an unhappy occurrence of the past, and to congratulate themselves on having led the way in first abolishing the slave trade and then slavery itself (though they were not, as they often think, the first in this: before 1833 the French had for a while abolished slavery during the Revolution, Haiti did so on achieving independence in 1804, many of the new Latin American states abolished it between 1811 and the 1820s, and so at about the same time did many of the northern states of the new USA).

The commemorations of 2007, which brought much new scholarly work to public attention, were a jolting reminder not just of past sins but, even more uncomfortably, of a present that only too evidently bore the marks of slavery’s legacy but of which there had been scant discussion. There was talk of a “*Mansfield Park* complex”, with reference to the famous passage in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814) where Fanny Price, seeking to ask questions about Sir Thomas Bertram’s slave-run sugar plantation in Antigua, [meets with a “dead silence”](#). That silence, resonant through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has now been broken.

A host of recent events and movements, much of it emanating from outside Britain, has brought slavery ever more firmly into the public consciousness, and conscience. The Black Lives Matter movement, which began in America in 2013 but went global with the death of George Floyd in May 2020, is the most obvious and most influential example. Also significant is the Rhodes Must Fall movement, in which the connection between colonialism and slavery is taken as axiomatic. Starting at the University of Cape Town in 2015, with the attack on Cecil Rhodes as a colonialist and racist, this movement rapidly spread to Britain and has taken several forms: demanding the removal of offending statues, calling for reparations for past wrongs to the Black population, and pressing for “decolonizing the curriculum” in schools and universities, with a particular focus on the need to confront Britain’s imperial past, including slavery and its legacy. Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex, drew the ire of the conservative press for supporting the movement, as she did again later for raising the question of racism in the royal family. For the British journalist Nadine Batchelor-Hunt, herself of mixed-race origin, Markle’s allegations of racism evoked old memories. “A lot of our ancestors were enslaved under the banner of the British empire in the name of the crown.”

It was the provocative contention of the Trinidadian historian - and future prime minister of Trinidad - Eric Williams that “slavery was not born of racism: rather racism was the consequence of slavery”. In his classic work, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944), Williams pointed out that the first workers on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean were indigenous Indians and white indentured Europeans. Only when these proved unsuitable or insufficient did planters turn to Africa and import African slaves. Considering Black Africans as chattel, and subjecting them to often inhuman treatment, led to a longstanding association among whites of Africans as sub-human, infantile, and in need of European guidance and the civilizing effects of Christianity. Racist attitudes persisted long after the abolition of slavery. That is the legacy that current concerns draw on.

From a capitalist point of view, however, Williams argued that plantation slavery was a passing phenomenon. Indispensable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for generating the wealth for investment and growth in the early Industrial Revolution, it could be safely abolished once the sugar plantations ceased to be the main source of prosperity. The triumphant victory of “free trade” in the nineteenth century, in sugar as in most other commodities, undermined the monopoly of the West Indian planters and the system of slavery that underpinned it. Britain could end slavery at this relatively early date because it led the way into the new form of industrial capitalism. But this did not mean the end of British support, or at least tolerance, of slavery elsewhere, whatever the rhetorical pronouncements of British abolitionists. British merchants and sugar refiners were quite happy to make use of slave-produced sugar from Cuba and Brazil; and British cotton manufacturers were heavily dependent on slave-produced cotton from the American South. What was offensive, in the eyes of British capitalists, was not slavery but monopoly. The British government came close to recognizing the Confederacy during the American Civil War; and the Liberal leader William Gladstone, whose family fortune had been made in the slave plantations of Jamaica and British Guiana, declared that “Jefferson Davis and other leaders of the South ... have made a nation”.

What has been called “the Williams thesis” was popular among Marxisant historians of the 1960s and 1970s. But then a reaction set in. Even Robin Blackburn, generally sympathetic to Marxist treatments, in *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery* (1988), found Williams’s “‘dialectical’ schema of capitalism using and discarding slavery ... mechanical and unsatisfactory” (a later work, *The Making of New World Slavery*, 1997, was less censorious). Blackburn preferred to follow the lead given by C. L. R. James, in *The Black Jacobins* (1938) - “the still unsurpassed model for understanding the struggle against slavery”, one that emphasized the role of the slaves’ own resistance in ending their servitude. Historians such as Roger Anstey, Seymour Drescher (*Econocide*, 1977), Stanley Engerman and others argued that far from being unprofitable the British slave-based sugar plantations - especially the newer ones in Trinidad and British Guiana - were still thriving in the early nineteenth century. The British sugar islands could have held their own against Cuba and Brazil, especially once the dominating presence of the French plantations of St Domingue had been removed by the success of the Haitian Revolution, which devastated sugar production there. Hence the powerful group of interests - stretching from the West Indian planters to the British Crown - that opposed the abolitionist movement. Abolition was achieved against, not along, the grain of economic self-interest. It took the heroic efforts of Evangelicals and Dissenters such as William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Thomas Fowell Buxton, at the cost of their health and even their lives, to overcome the enormous resistance that was put up to the abolition of both the slave trade and slavery itself. In this view, moral force and humanitarianism, not capitalist indifference or collusion, ended slavery in Britain.

Williams’s star has recently begun to wax again. Joseph E. Inikori’s *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (2002), was a powerful restatement of Williams’s main thesis, of the contribution of slavery to Britain’s industrial development. His work rekindled the debate, with many taking his side. Most of the “UCL school” - Hall, Draper, McClelland and others - accept at least what they call a “weak” or “modified version” of Williams’s position. The authors of all the three books under review here also express

enthusiasm for Williams. “Eric Williams was right”, says Padraic Scanlan. “Antislavery inherited the capitalism that slavery had made.” Michael Taylor says that “Williams’s thesis that abolition was dependent on the economic decline of the colonies is foundational to modern scholarship.”

Neither of these authors in truth follows up very much on these declarations, in the sense that having expressed their belief in Williams they don’t engage much with his argument. Their accounts, lively and informative in the main, go over reasonably familiar ground. Scanlan’s subtitle, “how slavery built modern Britain”, is a misnomer since the book is mainly about the abolition movement, though there is a clear, almost textbook-like, account of the sugar plantation system (Sidney Mintz’s well-known *Sweetness and Power*, 1985, is an invaluable complement). Scanlan is particularly good on the ill-fated “apprenticeship” scheme that was linked to abolition after 1834, whereby the freed slaves were bound to work for an extra six years on their owners’ plantations. The system, a clear failure, was abruptly ended after four years, after which the freed slaves fled the plantations in droves, forcing the planters to import thousands of indentured labourers from India and China (though in the end this did not save the West Indian plantations, which, faced with competition from Cuba and Brazil, went into steep decline). Scanlan does, in the last chapter, pick up the theme of slavery’s relation to British capitalism - through the dependence on American cotton - but here we already have a fuller and more incisive account in Sven Beckert’s much-praised *Empire of Cotton* (2014).

Michael Taylor’s *The Interest* offers a lot of detailed information about the “West India Interest” that was the main lobby, in Parliament and in the country more generally, for preserving the system of slavery on the Caribbean sugar plantations. He shows the support, not just of die-hard conservatives like William IV and the Duke of Wellington, and of conservative periodicals such as *Blackwood’s Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*, but also of influential “Liberal Tories” such as George Canning, William Huskisson and Robert Peel - not to mention William Gladstone, who was elected to Parliament on a pro-slavery platform at just about the time that his father was receiving compensation worth about £14 million in today’s money for the ending of slavery on his West Indian plantations. But Taylor spends almost as much time on the anti-slavery movement, and so covers a lot of the same ground as Scanlan. Moreover, having endorsed Williams, he concludes with a strong statement of the sheer contingency that brought together the forces that ended slavery in Britain in 1833: the political collapse of the Tories, and the return of Whig reformers; the pressure of the Anti-Slavery and Agency societies; and violent slave resistance, especially the Jamaican rebellion of 1831. This doesn’t sound much like the grand themes of declining capitalist support, and declining plantation profits, that Williams emphasized in explaining the success of abolition.

In the end both the books by Scanlan and Taylor have the same quality of lurching rather disconcertingly between detailed descriptions of lurid episodes of slavery (or of such incidents as the death of Huskisson in a train accident, to which Taylor devotes two pages) and ringing general declarations about slavery’s importance to British capitalism and the British Empire (“free trade was built on slave labour”; “slavery and empire were mutually reinforcing”; “trade made the empire; slavery made trade”). The connections between these two levels are rarely shown.

Kehinde Andrews is no less a fan of Williams than Scanlan and Taylor - Williams's account "remains the go-to book" for understanding how slavery contributed to British economic development - but he at least does him the service of giving detailed attention to his thesis, reviewing and dismissing contrary positions. But Andrews has much more on his plate than just British slavery. His book is a no-holds barred, searing indictment of the whole of modern Western civilization as based on slavery, colonialism and genocide - the three in Andrews's view being merely different aspects of the same story of western oppression and exploitation of Black and brown people. The powerful rhetorical tone is undeniably in keeping with the current climate of discussion of slavery, and makes the book particularly timely.

Slavery, colonialism and genocide are, says Andrews, the "key foundation stones upon which the West was built", and their legacies remain to this day, "shaping both wealth and inequality in a hierarchy of white supremacy". "White supremacy, and therefore anti-Blackness, is the fundamental basis of the political and economic system" of the West. Columbus began the "genocidal terror", unleashed on indigenous peoples, that continued with the European empires and culminated in the Holocaust. "In truth, the West was birthed by genocide". Thought and culture are not spared either. The European Enlightenment, source of all that the West thinks "progressive", was racist and imperialist and justified genocide. Although he does not quote him, Andrews would surely agree wholeheartedly with Joseph Conrad's verdict, in *Heart of Darkness*, that "all Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz", that "emissary of science and progress" to benighted peoples, among whose notes is scrawled the injunction "exterminate the brutes" (Raoul Peck's current HBO series, *Exterminate All the Brutes*, riffing off Conrad, indeed covers very much the same ground as Andrews's book, with a similar argument that there is a genocidal streak in modern Western civilization that extends to the Holocaust).

None of Andrews's claims is particularly original - there are strong echoes of Franz Fanon, Edward Said and other postcolonial theorists - but he has bound them up together in a powerful synthesis, and he does a fair job of backing up his claims with some detailed historical analysis. Peck too says "it's not knowledge we lack". What however, if one accepts the claims, does one do with them? Does one simply exclaim, again with Kurtz, "the horror! The horror!"? Does one support the call for reparations, dizzyingly difficult as the practicalities of that seem to be? Does one commit oneself to the struggle - in politics or pedagogy - to undo the legacies of slavery and colonialism?

Or does one rather challenge the whole narrative, as overblown and reductionist? Did slavery really build modern Britain? Was the Enlightenment wholly racist and imperialist (a good corrective would be Sankar Muthu's *Enlightenment Against Empire*, 2003)? Was its "universalism" just "an unreflecting cloak for European domination and 'white privilege'", as [Abigail Green put it recently in the TLS](#)? A whole stream of recent books, such as those by Jonathan Israel and Anthony Pagden, argues the contrary. Should we not at the very least unpick the bundle, slavery, colonialism and genocide, rather than referring to them as one unspeakable whole? Colonialism proceeded very well without slavery in several of its phases, in India and Africa; to draw a straight line from Columbus to the Holocaust is not only to slap the label "genocide" on too many varied episodes but also to simplify grossly what has been a far more complicated story of the

involvement of Europeans with others. It may be satisfying to some to throw the statue of Edward Colston, the Bristol slave-trader - and philanthropist - into the harbour; should we be meting out the same treatment to David Livingstone and the other missionaries who tried to take Christianity to Africa? Should William Gladstone, champion of the Bulgarians and Armenians against the Ottomans, be remembered only for his early defence of slavery? What of Allan Octavian Hume, member of the Imperial Civil Service, and Annie Besant, great supporters of Indian independence? Kurtz, as Conrad recognized, has many faces.

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