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SLAVERY, ABOLITION AND PUBLIC HISTORY¹

The 200th anniversary of the Abolition of the slave trade in 2007 was marked by a host of British institutions. The Abolition Act of 1807 has been described as the most important Act of Parliament ever. Not surprisingly, many major state and civic institutions offered their own distinctive version of 1807. The Houses of Parliament led the way followed, among others, by the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert, and the National Maritime Museum (both Greenwich and Liverpool). In fact dozens of institutions, down to tiny local schools, offered their own interpretation of the events leading to 1807 – and the significance of that Act. All this was in addition to a veritable blizzard of media coverage, and publications plus hundreds of lectures and a string of academic gatherings. Community-based organisations, ranging from the ‘Equiano Society’ to Wilberforce’s old school in Pocklington, were equally keen to join in. Never, at any point in my adult lifetime, has slavery and the slave trade occupied so central a place in such a broadly-based social and political debate as it did in Britain in 2007².

Naturally enough, the discussion about 1807-2007 was fraught with complications and problems. Many groups, keen to offer their own commemoration of Abolition, have been taken aback to discover that slavery poses a complexity of unusual problems. But this has long been known by anyone working in the ‘public history’ of slavery (see Kowaleski Wallace: 2006). Academic historians, drafted in to advise, are often taken aback by the contentiousness of the argument which flare up around public discussions of slavery. Even when confronting an apparently laudable event – the ending of the Atlantic slave trade – the uninitiated are likely to be surprised by the conse-

¹ This article updates, and elaborates on, a talk given at the National University of Australia in 2005. A slightly different version of this essay is to appear in McCalman and Pickering (eds.: in print)

² As a personal example, in the course of 2007 I delivered 89 invited lectures on abolition, in addition to dozens of radio and TV interviews.

quent debates, by the bitterness of the arguments, and by the directions they take.

The basic point is obvious: the history of Atlantic slavery is, from beginning to end (and even beyond, into the days of post-slavery freedom) a highly contested area. Moreover here is terrain to which large numbers of groups and individuals can legitimately claim some form of stake. Academics cannot fall back on the privilege of expertise and specialised knowledge in the hope of fending off critical voices from quarters they normally do not have to engage with. If the difficulties of bringing academic expertise to bear on so contested and sensitive a public issue are troublesome, they also offer their own rewards. Think of the relatively small number of people who have traditional access to scholarly work – and compare that to the hordes passing through a museum, gallery, watching a TV screen or the millions listening to the BBC World Service. Hundreds of thousands of people have trudged through the Slave Trade wing in Liverpool's Maritime Museum in the past decade, before it was englobed within the International Slavery Museum, inaugurated in August 2007 in order to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade. Yet, until 1992, Liverpool paid little public attention to that port's remarkable entanglement with Atlantic slavery.

Background

For the past thirty years, my main area of interest has been chattel slavery in the Americas. In that time the subject has developed from one which seemed (in the U.K. at least) a marginal topic, relevant to Americanists and Africanists, rather than European historians. Today it is impossible to keep abreast of the relevant literature. Major conferences devoted to slavery pop up in all corners of the globe. On the back of Atlantic slavery there has been a revitalisation of slave studies from the classical world to the twentieth century³. It is an indication of the central position now occupied by black slavery that, in both the popular and educated mind, when we speak of slavery it is widely assumed we mean *black* slavery. Slaves were black: to be black was to be enslaved. Of course this was not true in a host of slave societies. It is also an indication of the powerful role of black slavery in the public imagination that it is commonly assumed that

³ See the annual bibliography on slavery published in the journal *Slavery and Abolition*.

the ending of black slavery in the Americas (finally in Brazil as late as 1888) brought slavery to an end⁴. Yet Anti-Slavery International, the modern-day descendant of the Anti-Slavery Society founded in 1829, continues to thrive in London, overwhelmed by the task of campaigning against slave systems the world over. Slavery lives on.

Nonetheless, the Atlantic slave system has captured the imagination, not least because few areas of modern history can match the litany of human suffering which is the core of Atlantic slavery – especially of the Atlantic slave trade itself. But placed in the long history of slavery, the highly-racialized slave systems of the Atlantic were perhaps the *exception* rather than the rule. Their chronological proximity and their pervasive consequences down to the present day, explain why slavery is popularly equated with Africans. The demographic data also help to explain how ethnicity and slavery have become so confused. About twelve million Africans were loaded onto the Atlantic slave ships, and about ten and a half million Africans survived the Atlantic crossing, spread over a period of almost four centuries. We cannot tell how many enslaved people died in Africa itself en route to the coast. The statistics can be sliced in any number of ways. By 1820 for example some 11 million people had crossed the Atlantic to settle in the Americas. But of these only about two and a half million were European: the rest were African⁵. Across huge swathes of the Americas, especially in Brazil and the Caribbean, it was the African, not the European, who was the key pioneer of settlement. And all this for the economic betterment of European settlers and their political and economic sponsors.

It would be wrong to imagine that these events, played out largely on the African coast, in the Atlantic and in the Americas, played only a marginal role in British history. Until recently however there was a tendency to consider this story of Atlantic slavery as a distant, foreign episode; out of sight and generally out of mind. In part this was a consequence of academic specialisms, and the understandable sense that slavery was an area best left to Africanists, Americanists or maritime historians. What has emerged in recent years has been a growing awareness of the centrality of slavery to the British historical experience. It is now accepted that what happened in the enslaved Atlantic was integral to the emergence of Britain itself in the period, say 1655-1807.

⁴ For the most recent study see David Brion Davis (2006).

⁵ The statistics of the trade are to be found in David Eltis, *et al*, *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: a Database*: www.slavevoyages.org.

That basic point is most obvious when we consider the history of the major slave trading ports. By turns, London, Bristol, Liverpool dominated that trade at different periods, but there were a host of smaller ports involved, some of them, today, unlikely candidates: who would imagine Poole or Lyme Regis as slaving ports? We now know that of the 27,000 slave trading voyages, about 11,000 were British (or British colonial) and of those almost 6,000 originated from Liverpool.

The holds of those outward-bound ships, destined for trade and barter along the African coast, were packed with goods drawn largely from the economic hinterland of the home port. But they also carried manufactured goods and produce from throughout Britain, alongside items transhipped from Europe (French wines) and Asia (Indian textiles, and cowry shells from the Maldives.) As the trade to Africa grew, and as slavery yielded a growing bounty to the adventurous (and the lucky), involvement in the Atlantic trade proved irresistible for ever more people in all corners of British life (Morgan: 2001). Those who resisted the lure of slave trading – notably the Quakers – seemed odd in suggesting that ethical and religious issues should over-ride profits. Few sided with the Quakers, initially at least, preferring instead to accept the assumption that slavery was the source of very great well-being to the British. Indeed the debates inside Parliament, from 1690 onwards, were primarily how best to regulate and encourage the trade in African humanity (Pettigrew: 2007).

Slaves and slavery also flitted in and out of British life. The evidence is there for all to see. The legal complexities of slaves in England periodically taxed English courts: black faces can readily be found in 17th and 18th century portraiture, and Africans and their descendants appear in parish registers, and on graveyard headstones (see Dabydeen, Gilmore and Jones, eds.: 2007). More impressive, though sometimes not obvious, the rewards from slave labour can be seen in a range of British buildings, few more spectacular than Harewood House in Yorkshire (Lord Harewood's ancestors made their millions in the sugar trade). Less noticed perhaps was the impact of slave-grown produce on European social life (Walvin: 1997). Slaves hovered, ghost-like, over British social life in those rituals of sweet-tea drinking, and the masculine world of tobacco culture.

The British Atlantic slave system was kept intact by British military and maritime power. The Royal Naval presence in the Atlantic and along the Caribbean sea lanes secured the vital flow of supplies of Africans. The Navy also ensured that the Caribbean slave colonies remained armed against the permanently-rebellious instincts of their enslaved populations. It was no accident that all the great British

naval heroes of the 18th century had learned their craft in Caribbean waters. The Africans were of course ferried into the Americas on a massive flotilla of private, commercial merchant ships. And by the mid-18th century this trade was dominated by Liverpool. But it would have been impossible to appreciate that fact by visiting the Liverpool Maritime Museum before 1992.

Liverpool

Liverpool is home to an old black community, with strong nineteenth century links both to West Africa and the Caribbean. But there was initially scant mention of this, or of the slave trade in the Maritime Museum. Perched above a sack of sugar, in a obscure corner of the Museum, there was a map showing a simple triangular Atlantic trade. And that was it. This failure to engage with Liverpool's slave trading past was made good by the determination of one of Liverpool's most wealthy men – Peter Moores (Littlewoods football pools and stores, and various Moores' foundations). Moores, convinced that slavery had been 'a taboo subject' in Liverpool, put up a large sum to establish a slave trade wing within the existing Liverpool Maritime Museum. I was invited to join a team of guest curators, on a project which was to prove difficult, troublesome and sometimes worrying. It was soon apparent that writing a book about slavery was simplicity itself compared to mounting a public exhibition about it.

The problems were manifold (and obvious) as soon as you begin to think about such an exhibition. One local Professor of History (a distinguished Africanist) cautioned us not to try: we should decline the offer (and presumably let England's premier slave port continue to ignore its eighteenth century history. By 1807 for example, one African in five crossed the Atlantic in a Liverpool ship.) With a large sum to spend, the museum and its advisors were not about to take that route. But the topic - slavery and Liverpool - forms a brew of just about every contentious issue you might wish to discuss: race, guilt, compensation, city politics, schooling, community relations, urban deprivation, unemployment, gender. And all this in addition to whatever arguments the transient academics might want to air.

The benefactor had a small specialised committee liaising with the museum (itself responsible to the broader national maritime museum network.) The museum appointed a group of historians to advise. Initially that group was overwhelmingly white, predominantly male. The decision to incorporate more women, more blacks, raised further questions: should we turn to African men/women? One black

committee member was African, but had lived in the U.S. for many years and his American accent displeased some members of the local community, with whom we had periodic discussions. For some reason or other, accent also mattered.

There we faced a hostile and sometimes an aggressive reception ranging from root-and-branch opposition to the whole idea, to a demand that the museum should be moved to the black community in Toxteth (i.e. up a hill), through to more manageable points that training and employment ought to be offered to members of the local black community. However the existence of a predominantly white advisory group, talking about black history, remained a permanent irritant. Arguments regularly surfaced about ‘insiders and outsiders’, about the rights and wrongs of outsiders (outsiders by ethnicity, regional or national origins – and sensibility) versus insiders. It was an argument familiar to anyone who had watched the history of the U.S.A. in the 1960’s and 1970’s. But for those of us, like myself, who were outsiders, it was an unwinnable argument: intellectually-crippling, historically-restrictive and yet not completely pointless.

No less time-consuming were the debates among the historians about how to represent the interior of the slave ships. How could we characterise human violations on that scale: should we even try to convey the stable-like squalor of a mid-oceanic slave ship, the living and the dead chained together, pitching and rolling in their own filth for weeks on end? It quickly emerged that historians are not very good at dealing with such issues. The abstract analysis of the numbers of Africans involved (the death and sick rates, survival rates, timings of crossings, all and more) seem morally neutral when stripped of their humanity. Efforts to present accounts of the stink of a slave ship, the shrieks of the mad and the distressed, and the agonies of the dying, raised the fundamental question of our obligation to the visiting public. Do we want to rub the visitors’ noses in the slave mire in order to make a (perfectly valid) point? Are there others ways of addressing the issue?

In the event, an easier, less sensational route was chosen: of flickering images in a darkened room to the sound of a creaking ship and hushed voices. Even in so muted a form, this proved to be one section of the exhibit which often caused the greatest distress to black visitors. It stood as a reminder that poignant effectiveness often flows from gently-made arguments⁶.

⁶ The publication which emerged from this enterprise is *Transatlantic Slavery. Against Human Dignity* (Anthony Tibbles, ed.: 1994).

The outcome

The slave trade gallery doubled the numbers of people visiting the Liverpool Maritime Museum in its first twelve months (1994-95.) Numbers did inevitably trail off, but continued at a healthy and responsive level. The notice board, inviting visitors' written comments (all of which were kept and analysed) proved remarkably revealing. My own worries that they might attract racist remarks were ill-founded. Among school visitors, reactions have been overwhelmingly positive. Overall, the slave trade wing has proved a great success, with favourable international publicity, and a steady stream of VIPs. In 2007 this gallery made way for a new museum of slavery (see Vivan, this volume) – and all on the back of 1807/2007 and the status of European City of Culture for Liverpool in 2008. And yet, and yet...

Pulling punches

For a decade, here was an exhibition which, of necessity, pulls its punches. How could it be otherwise? For a start it represents work by a committee, monitored by a host museum, itself responsible to a benefactor who, perfectly properly, had his own vision of what was required. The flurry of substantial memos and briefing papers which all the academic advisors were expected to produce (some of which ran to thesis-like length) were reduced, in the end, to simple captions. The art of museum caption-writing is more akin to drafting a newspaper headline than developing a scholarly argument. Moreover, academics can, within the limits of our own self-determined argument, say what we want. We need not worry about whether people like or approve of what we say or write; whether it will ruffle sections of an urban community. We don't concern ourselves, normally, with how the casual visitors might react to our ideas (not least because they rarely encounter them). Providing we roughly accord to the conventions of scholarship, we can write and say more or less what we want. I doubt that this is possible in the more exposed and communally-responsive environment of public history.

The problems of public history

Though the difficulties of discussing the slave past are similar to those encountered in other fields of historical reconstruction, slavery poses its own distinct and peculiar difficulties. Today, there is an odd

juxtaposition of slavery and modern tourism. Slavery thrived in many regions which are, today, attractive tourist destinations. Parts of the USA, and especially the Caribbean, try to utilise their past to add to their commercial/tourist attractions. But how do you talk about slavery in terms which are accurate, decent and yet not rebarbative? The Caribbean poses special difficulties for anyone keen to combine a sense of the past with natural tourist attractions, for here was the centre of some of the worst slave violations. Discussing the slave experience for bus and boat loads of tourists leads to an inevitable pulling of punches, or even to overlooking aspects of the past which are too uncomfortable to present to a tourist public. This is particularly striking on plantations.

The plantation was the crucible in which raw African muscle was harnessed via a brutal regime to the task of tapping the economic potential of the region, and all for the economic betterment of white settlers and their European backers. It is clear enough that, notwithstanding variations (determined largely by the nature of the local crop) the plantation represented the slaves' time on the cross. Even in the more benign culture of tobacco (as opposed to sugar for example), the levels of brutality doled out to the slaves was astonishing – even by eighteenth centuries standards. Plantations were developed in fertile tropical and sub-tropical regions, at a number of sites which today are attractive destinations for tourists in search of natural beauty, sunshine and a taste of the romantic past. Yet there is nothing romantic about black chattel slavery. Consequently, the problem of historical reconstruction on old plantations has often been resolved by dissembling: not so much distorting, but forgetting.

It normally begins with the brochure handed out as you buy your entry ticket. For more than twenty years I have collected brochures and advertisements from tourists sites housed on former slave sites, and the deceptions are commonplace. Let me give you some examples.

Belvedere Estate, Jamaica: “invites you to take a step back in time” (but not *too* far back of course in case you trip over a slave).

“Visit our historical ruins.” (i.e. the factory and the Great House – but not the slave cabins).

“Consult our herbalist.” The picture used here is of a woman dressed in African slave dress, pounding ingredients. She would almost certainly have been an *obeah* woman (an African medicine woman), i.e. the very person planters feared, and persecuted because of the mysterious power she exercised over the slaves. Yet today, she is offered as a quaint folk figure, neutralised of her historical importance.

Time and again, the antiquity of a plantation is represented by its fine old buildings, or in dynastic terms: a family has owned and lived on the property for X number of years. Or the Great House has been restored to its former glory. Or the furnishings of the Great House are 'traditional planters' furnishings'. At Good Hope estate, some 15 miles from Montego Bay on the north coast of Jamaica, a group of wealthy investors have converted the property into an expensive hotel for prosperous (mainly North American and Japanese) tourists. Here the emphasis is on location, peacefulness and furnishings. They stress the property's wonderful outlook, which is indeed stunning. But anyone with a historical sense will immediately grasp another major point. This late 18th century Great House, lavishly constructed from dressed stone by an army of skilled workers, was actually built by slaves – as were the furnishings. And the whole enterprise of course was made possible by the fruits of slave labour, in the fields which fall away from the Great House down to the river: thence to the sugar markets of Britain. But there is another, less obvious story, lurking on the horizon. If you look to the south, you will see the impenetrable range of interior mountains and jungle – 'the cockpit country' – which provided an escape for runaway slaves, and which came to house runaway communities. Those communities pressed hard on slave properties like Good Hope. For all their wealth and domestic splendour, successful planters lived a precarious life, worried about their own slaves, fearful of runaways and always conscious of the revenge they might exact at any moment. Yet the tourist will only learn of this from other sources. Certainly, the tourist-conscious owners don't want to let them into the secret.

Similar stories could be recited from one former slave colony to another. Even when the slave past is confronted, it is often skipped over lightly. In Barbados, tourists are given a booklet, *Heritage Sites of Barbados*, which breezily describes the island's history thus:

Some 10 Africans came to Barbados in 1627 as the first slaves and with the coming of the 'Sugar Revolution' in 1643-50 their numbers increased until they outnumbered the English settlers by 12 to 1. For some 207 years, Barbados was a slave plantation society (Sheppard: 1996).

In fact, in that time, perhaps one third of a million Africans had been landed in Barbados – an island the size of the Isle of Wight.

If you really want to see cosmetic historical surgery at its most extreme, you might visit some of the beautiful former slave properties in North America. Many promote themselves as tourist attractions via the splendours of the buildings (normally the planter's Great House),

their lavish gardens, or simply through that mythical ‘moonlight and magnolia’ which entered popular culture mainly via the movies. Here are some examples.

‘Kent House’ Louisiana: ‘Built when interest rates were only 1.5%’.

Or you might want to visit Middleton Place near Charleston, South Carolina, with “America’s oldest landscaped gardens” and where the only violence mentioned is the burning of the property in the Civil War. Across the South – Old South and Deep South – the present-day owners of former slave sites emphasise the architecture, the fittings and the landscape, but rarely mention the black labour force which made everything possible. More than that, when you look at the brochures and booklets produced for the tourists, you will rarely see a black face. Normally, the frames are occupied by well-fed white people (their beaming smiles an advert for costly dental care) and often dressed in ‘traditional’ costume.

If you drive along the road which clings to the James River in Virginia, running east from Richmond towards the Chesapeake Bay at Norfolk, you pass through the heart of the early tobacco culture: the region which was the economic bedrock of the Old South and which yielded such prosperity to settlers and Europeans – and such miseries to armies of Africans and their local-born descendants. By 1800 there were almost one third of a million slaves in the region. Today it is a popular tourist destination, and the river road is dotted with plantations beckoning the tourist from all angles. Visit those properties, wander through the gardens and houses, look out across the James River (the final leg of that interminable slave voyage from Africa, and the export point for the slave-grown tobacco departing for Glasgow) and you will find barely a *mention* of slaves. I have collected a fistful of literature from those properties and, from first to last, slaves are conspicuous by their absence. Again, the accompanying pictures rarely, if ever, display a black face. The plantation literature offers touching dynastic stories: loving spouses dead before their time, tales of Civil War heroics (amputations on the kitchen table), the centuries’ long struggle to keep the property in good shape. But you look in vain for the people who made everything possible – the slaves⁷.

The tourist heart of the region is of course Colonial Williamsburg. And here, again, the issue of slavery is fundamental to local history.

⁷ For the other side of the story of slavery in this region, see Issac (2004).

For years Colonial Williamsburg has wrestled with the problem of how best to present slavery to the tourists. The starting point must be demographic. Colonial Williamsburg has been reconstructed as it was in 1774. But in 1774, 49% of the local population was black, though no tourist today would grasp that fact, however long you spent in the town. Once a marginal theme in the town's representation of itself, slavery has been shifted to a much more central location, with slave quarters, African-American churches and interpreters, and every interpreter well-briefed about the broader issue of slavery in Williamsburg and the nation at large. Williamsburg, along with other similar tourist sites in the same region (notably Monticello and Mount Vernon), have given long and costly thought to the question of slavery and to the local black presence. But the debate how best to present the slave presence continues to pose problems (especially in the context of a continuing decline in tourist numbers).

At both Mount Vernon and Monticello, slavery has similarly shifted from the margins to the centre of local representations. On my first visit to Monticello as a tourist in 1979, the lady guide (known at the time as a 'hostess') made no mention of slavery whatsoever; even the most innocuous questions about slavery were treated as a form of intrusive vulgarity. Today, the issue of slavery is normally the first issue raised by the guide. There, and at Williamsburg, the local African-American guides and interpreters provide excellent accounts of slave life in both places. In fact I found them the best of all the various local guides. In the wake of the Sally Hemmings affair, it would have been impossible for Monticello to persist with its earlier marginalisation of slavery. But in all these three major Virginian slave sites, two of them homes of Presidents, slavery had been central to economic and social existence. Over the past generation, all three inevitably came under pressure from local and national African-American community and interest groups, and all have clearly been influenced by the ebb and flow of academic debate about slavery. Williamsburg has its own coterie of distinguished historians, and has links with the College historians on its doorstep, in addition to inviting outside scholars to engage in the debate about the representation of local slavery. Monticello is of course intimately linked to Jefferson's own foundation, the University of Virginia, while Mount Vernon nestles close the nation's political capital. Each, for different though related reasons, has registered the seismic shifts which have transformed our understanding of the slave past over the past generation.

Conclusions

Today, there are myriads of institutions across the U.S.A. which seek in some way to memorialise slavery. The process however has been slower and more muted in the U.K. – for some perfectly good (and some rather bad) reasons. But the gradual movement of the history of slavery towards the centre of British cultural considerations in 2007 created an irresistible momentum. Over the course of 2007, spurred by keen governmental interest (the Deputy Prime Minister chaired a committee which oversaw the events organised for 2007) the proliferation of slave trade-based events and memorabilia was extraordinary. There were special postage stamps, an abolition £2 coin from the Royal Mint and – most lasting of all perhaps – a decision to include the history of the slave trade and slavery in the national curriculum for schools. On top of this, the BBC (radio and TV) provided massive coverage of abolition: most departments were keen to involve themselves – including comedy. Religion, drama, current affairs and news, the World Service, the BBC website – all and more had their say. All this represented a massive shift away from an older outlook which tended to consider slavery as distant and remote, a marginal theme in British historical interests. This shift was most noticeable when the Archbishop of Canterbury, in a sermon preached before the Queen in Westminster Abbey, listed the benefits which flowed to Britain on the back of Atlantic slavery⁸. Rowan Williams was speaking in the vein and tone of his namesake Eric.

Of course these links – these material benefits – have long been obvious – if you scratch away at the physical fabric of British life. What initially seems an unlikely object often yields enslaved foundations. Take the example of Harewood House in Yorkshire. One of the nation's most beautiful stately homes, a staggering Palladian pile, set in grounds designed by Capability Brown, its furnishings by Chippendale, and housing one the country's finest private art collections. It is the family home of Lord Harewood, first cousin to the Queen. The Harewood Trust which runs the house is currently considering how best to use the family's history to maintain and enhance the 300,000 and more visitors needed each year to pay the bills. In origin Harewood House was built on the sugar trade, and therefore on the labour of enslaved Africans. The Harewoods transformed themselves

⁸ Dr Williams made a string of lectures and sermons in March 2007, from Zanzibar to Hull, on the issue of the Church, slavery and reparations: see *The Guardian*, March 26 2007, *BBC, News* website March 27: and The Wilberforce lecture, Hull, April 24th 2007.

from humble Yorkshire gentry stock (the Lascelles) into aristocrats of fabulous wealth in the period 1690-1807. This was achieved via trade to and from the Caribbean, on government contracts (mainly with the Royal Navy and Customs-collecting in Barbados), on money-lending to planters, and eventually as planters (and therefore slave owners) on a staggering scale. In 1787 they owned 18 plantations on four different islands: the Harewoods sold their last Barbadian plantation in 1970 (Walvin: 2005). But who, today, could walk through Harewood House and even *imagine* that everything hinged on the labour of Africans in the Caribbean? Who would think that Harewood House has *anything* to do with slavery? Yet to confront that fact, to attract tourists, poses substantial difficulties (not least the risk of incurring the animosity of the West Indian community, ten miles down the road in Leeds). Yet to ignore the defining fact of slavery would invite even more trouble.

Other British institutions face similar and related difficulties. The Maritime Museum in Greenwich has a new 'slavery collection', bought at substantial expense from a private collector. It contains a number of fine late 18th century cartoons and caricatures, which, though familiar to students of the period, are often shockingly racist and deeply disturbing to the casual visitor: the Museum is perched on the edge of a large black community. At a private viewing when the collection was first acquired, there was vociferous indignation from local black community leaders. The idea of displaying such material in public exhibitions seemed merely to promote continuing racist imagery. Museum staff had to give serious thought how best to present their new acquisitions, a problem unlikely to trouble an academic author who wanted to publish or write about those same images.

Harewood House and the Maritime Museum today, like the Liverpool Maritime Museum a decade earlier, are caught in the same intellectual – and political – problem: how best to deal with a topic of enormous social sensitivity. The same difficulties arose when Parliament itself decided to have a 1807-2007 exhibition in Westminster Hall. It was natural for Parliament to enter the commemorative field, after all it was an Act of Parliament which banned the slave trade after 1807. The problems were, again, complex and often unpredictable. And the structure of managerial command labyrinthine (involving both Houses, both Speakers, the Parliamentary Estate and even the Monarchy – with various government departments invited to keep a watching brief on the unfolding exhibition). Any exhibition in Westminster Hall faces the daunting presence of the Hall itself, with its overpowering physical presence, and location for some of

the nation's most critical historic moments.

Yet 1807 was problematic even for Parliament. How could Parliament represent the story of its abolitionist role in 1807 *without* mentioning the role of Parliament in the previous century – in legislating *in favour* of the trade? It was a sign of how the historical study of slavery had changed in recent years that the Parliamentary Exhibition of 2007 faced a different set of intellectual considerations from those facing Liverpool fifteen years earlier. First of all the slave trade itself looks very different (thanks in large part to the remarkable researches of David Eltis, David Richardson and their colleagues). We know so much more about the minutiae of the slave trade, which now seems bigger, more pervasive, more central than we had thought previously. *And* it was at its height when the British decided to turn their back on it. Secondly abolition also looks very different. Recent studies of abolition have revealed it to be more broadly-based, more popular, and to have included female and African voices in ways rarely considered earlier. Thus the story of the abolition of the slave trade has to be presented as a very different historical phenomenon than we imagined only a generation ago (see the *Illustrated Exhibition Catalogue*, in Farrell, Unwin and Walvin: 2007).

These historical changes were at the heart of arguments which ranged back and forth across the country's museums, galleries, libraries and public forums in 2007, and for at least two years before. (To my knowledge only one major institution – The National Archives – decided NOT to commemorate 1807, for reasons which have never been publicly explained). What unfolded in the course of 2007 was in effect a prolonged, national debate about abolition – but about other more profound issues as well. 2007 saw a public engagement about critical aspects of British history, the likes of which I had never experienced in 40 years as a professional historian. (The French had similar discussions in 1989 on their own bicentenary). Of course the long-term effects of these commemorations are more uncertain, but there is no doubt, already, that 2007 has provided an important catalyst for a remarkable public debate about history, about the nature of British involvement with the wider world, and even with the very idea of what we mean by the creation of British identity (that favourite word).

What had seemed, at first sight, a simple, unexceptional proposal – to memorialise the abolition of the slave trade in a fashion which is appropriate to specific institutions – was promptly transformed into a confused but productive cultural debate which had social and political ramifications few could predict. And the debate rumbles on: what should we do about slavery?

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