# The legacies of British slave ownership

## Catherine Hall talks to Ruth Ramsden-Karelse

### The legacies of history continue to structure Britain's present.

**Ruth:** You have been working on the Legacies of British Slave-ownership (LBS) Project since 2009.[1] Could you tell us a bit about how the project started and what your journey was through the ten-year period?

**Catherine:** The project came out of some earlier work that was connected with the recognition of Britain's position as a postcolonial country, and how that needed thinking about, which meant, in part, thinking about the history of Empire alongside the history of Britain. Traditionally those histories have been taught and studied separately, so insisting on the connection was a very important break to make. That was one part of what we were thinking about: we were making the argument from the beginning that slavery was very significant to Britain's history. Traditionally it has been thought that what was really important was that Britain abolished slavery. But Britain abolished slavery after centuries of practising it - albeit mostly in places far away from Britain. So that was part of what we were doing.

The other aspect of it was building on the very important arguments which Eric Williams, a Trinidadian, had made decades ago in his classic study *Capitalism and Slavery*.[2] Williams argued that the wealth generated by slavery was very significant

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for the development of industrialisation in Britain. This argument had been denounced over generations, particularly by US historians, but also in Britain. We went back to it, to investigate it, and to see what the connections really might be. Those were the two questions that we were addressing. We chose to come at this through the question of slave ownership. We wanted to show that ordinary Britons, some of them very wealthy, some of them not, were involved in slavery. The whole idea of the focus on white Britons and slave ownership was to show how Britain was involved in slavery.

**Ruth:** As you know, I'm originally from South Africa but am now living in Oxford, where the Rhodes Must Fall movement has been reinvigorated by the recent toppling of the Edward Colston statue in Bristol. Here and at the University of Cape Town, activists have used statues of Cecil Rhodes to highlight various oppressive colonial legacies, specifically in relation to the university system, and to articulate a broader set of decolonisation demands. As we are speaking, I'm thinking about this defensive British idea that slavery is something that happened somewhere else. One of the obvious differences in South Africa is that this sort of idea can't take root in the same way: the ways in which settler colonialism and apartheid have been enacted mean there is greater understanding to begin with of how these histories continue to structure the present.

You've been pointing out for a long time that such histories are in fact also crucial for understanding the present here in the UK. I'm interested in hearing more about how you've made this argument, and also whether responses to the LBS project have changed over time. It seems as though we are now at this really significant moment in which there is ostensibly more of a commitment to having these conversations. Have you found that responses to the Project have changed during this time, and that you've been called upon less to make the argument that this is something that does matter here?

**Catherine:** I think that things have changed, but also that there is still a huge amount of work to do. One of the key ways in which slavery has always been discussed in Britain has been through distantiation (that is, putting slavery at a distance). This happened from the very beginning: 'it's not happening here, it's happening over there'. And I think that that has enabled the denial of Britain's direct involvement in slavery. Denial or disavowal has been absolutely central to

white British thinking: 'Race has nothing to do with us: it's what happens in the US, South Africa and the Caribbean - it's not here'. Actually race has always been here. We know of course that Black people were here in Roman times. But it is about much more than this. Ever since the development of colonialism, the racialisation of colonised populations has been absolutely central to how Empire has worked, and that has been central to the history of Britain.

It's interesting that when we first started making public the results of our project, people needed to think about it and be convinced. And it is the case that some things have changed: even in the mainstream press today there is an understanding that abolition isn't the only thing to talk about in relation to slavery. The idea of the significance of the compensation that was paid to slave-owners on abolition seems to have entered into a more public discourse. The taking down of the Colston statue is symbolic of a shift in the temperature in these matters. The Colston statue, as anyone in Bristol knows, has been argued about for a very long time and has been a source of real conflict. It became a national matter when it was so dramatically taken off its plinth, and what that meant has had a very important impact on how people think about statues in general, and history and memory, and how slavery figures in all of that.

**Ruth:** Was there a heightened interest in the project after the toppling of the Colston statue?

**Catherine:** There was indeed! It was absolutely extraordinary. We normally get about 2000 hits a day on our website - but in the days after we were getting 40-50,000 hits a day. People were coming to the website to look at the records, not just for information on compensation (which was what the first phase of our project was about). The second phase of the project has been about British slave owners in the Caribbean between the mid-eighteenth century and the time of the emancipation - so there's actually an enormous amount of material on the website about slave ownership and Britain's involvement in it. People are very interested in it and we've got lots of evidence of the material being used in schools, in universities and by family historians. One of the most important things about the project is that we now have more than 1000 people who have contributed material to our database, so that it's not just the team that have been doing it. It's a genuinely public resource. We're very proud of that.

**Ruth:** I was excited to see that there's guidance and information downloadable from the website for people who want to do research themselves.

As you mentioned, there have always been historians who have pointed out the ways in which the legacies of slavery continue to structure Britain's present, and it seems as though you went into the LBS project wanting to map this out and produce further illustrative detail. Was there anything that surprised you over the course of the project, though, that you weren't expecting to find?

**Catherine:** Loads of things - and of course that's what makes it so interesting. We knew beforehand, as other historians have done work on this, about some of the very significant and wealthy people who got compensation - who they were and what they did politically: people like John Gladstone (William Gladstone's father), for instance - but what we found was that there were slave owners right across England and Scotland particularly - less in Wales and, interestingly, less in Ireland.

So that was one thing. We mapped all the people that we had addresses for, and this is something that teachers really like because in a school classroom you can take a look at Maidenhead, for instance, and see who were the slave-owners living in that area. You'd be surprised because they're all over - so that's been very important. The other thing that's been very significant is that they are not all wealthy: quite a few people were, for instance, widows living on annuities which were funded by enslaved people in the Caribbean being hired out. These were small-scale slave-owners who no doubt didn't think of themselves as slave-owners at all, though they were beneficiaries of slavery. The other interesting thing is the number of women, because insofar as we have a picture of slave owners, we tend to see them as men - and they usually were - but about 25 per cent of the people in Britain who got compensation were women. In the Caribbean, of those who got compensation, more than 40 per cent were women, and quite a large number of them were women of colour. That complicates the whole question of race and legacies and racialisation, which is absolutely essential to what we are thinking about.

**Ruth:** So by considering those compensated as individuals, rather than as a vaguely defined mass of elite white men, for example, we can recognise that many of these individuals were women and in that way deepen our understanding of the broader issues at play. It strikes me that we both use personal, intimate kinds of histories

in our work as a way into thinking about historical patterns that can occlude complexity. In my own work, I write about someone called Kewpie, who identified as gay - though she might now be read by people as either trans or queer - who was part of a community that was legally classified 'Coloured' in Apartheid South Africa and forcibly removed from their homes in Cape Town. I myself come from a family that was legally classified 'Coloured' and forcibly removed from their homes in Cape Town, and I also identify as gay - so there are ways in which I feel very personally invested in this work, but I'm also writing about it at a huge remove: I'm in the UK and I'm often read as white and straight, and I'm doing my PhD at Oxford, so there's obviously a massive difference from the actual material conditions that I'm writing about. This has been a productive tension for me, between a deep-rooted personal investment, on the one hand, and an awareness of an inescapable distance from what I'm working on, on the other. It has ultimately been very important to me. Given these similarities in our work, I'd be really interested to hear more about how you've navigated and thought about your own positionality in relation to your work and your use of intimate, personal histories as a way into thinking about larger histories.

**Catherine:** I think you've said lots of interesting things there. Let me start by saying: I grew up in a radical, white non-conformist family and I came to politics through that, but then I really grew up politically through feminism. So an understanding of all my original work was about gender and class. Then, in the context of the women's movement, I was very involved in a journal called *Feminist Review* (which is still flourishing), and in the 1980s we had lots of arguments and discussions about relations between black and white feminists. So it was really in the context of a new race politics in Britain in the 1980s that I became seriously aware of my own situation as a white woman and what white privilege was about. For me, that became the crucial reason why I wanted to engage in a different kind of history, a different kind of writing about British history, which would be an exploration of the patterns of race within that. I do profoundly believe that the past lives on in the present and that in the present we're always negotiating with the past - that exploration of the persistence of patterns of racialisation, and changes and shifts in the practice of racisms. Now I'm working on the eighteenth century, which is different from the nineteenth century, but I've been working on the Caribbean for a long time, looking at the ways in which racial thinking became part of English

culture. That has really been at the heart of what I've been doing.

Coming to the point you made about what kind of histories we both write, using individual stories as ways into systemic patterns of inequality and questions of social and economic and political structure - I've found that a very satisfying way to work, and that takes me right back to my feminism, because I've always thought that the relation between the public and the private is very intimate. I'm interested in how people live race, how they live gender, how they live the structures in which they are, and also what kinds of agency individuals do have, so that we're not simply produced by the structures we live in, though we have to live and work with those structures. We can do things with them, and that's part of having hope politically: there is space for change.

**Ruth:** That really resonates with me. Listening to some of the podcasts you've appeared in, for example, it becomes obvious that anyone who does this sort of work and is talking about histories of trauma, violence and exploitation is easily accused of having a partial agenda, in the sense of being partisan - of attacking a narrative that is of course completely subjective but has been established as objective, as the Golden Thread of British History, a top-down version of 'facts, fact, facts'. I've been wondering what balance looks like with histories like this, and whether we even should be seeking balance. Discussing the 'pros and cons' of the British Empire, for example - which is an alarmingly common way of it being taught in schools - is just completely bizarre. How are these 'pros and cons' being weighed up? 'Pros and cons' for whom? It actively discourages any understanding of the human cost involved. Do you have any thoughts on what balance looks like in these instances, and whether we should even be aiming for balance at all? Is 'balance' just code for the kind of ideology that is being used to stop these histories being taught?

**Catherine:** I'm certainly not aiming for balance. I'm aiming to get as close as I can to an understanding of how individuals and societies worked in the past - which will always be through the prism of the present, because I live in the present. The idea that historians are objective - I don't believe it. I know that I am attacked for that. That's fine - I'm not trying to defend my work as objective. But when it comes to the materials and documents that I use - I test them against other kinds of materials to try to understand how things work, not putting my own pattern on things, but trying to understand what's going on, looking at a whole range of sources to do that.

# The legacies of British slave ownership

One of the people that I've chosen to work on in my research on the eighteenth century is a well-known slave-owner and racist called Edward Long - because I want to understand how he understood eighteenth-century Jamaican and English society. He was one of the architects of new forms of racialisation in eighteenth-century Jamaica, building on what his father, grandfather and great grandfather had done before him. The four of them can be understood as architects of colonialism in the American context.

**Ruth:** That's really interesting. The LBS project explores various senses in which colonial slavery shaped modern Britain: a drop-down menu on the website distinguishes between commercial, political and cultural legacies. So you show that someone like Long informed not only our material landscape but our thinking. My work is similarly concerned with the manner in which certain understandings of the past are consolidated. For example, I work with a collection of photographs that was created by the community it depicts: Kewpie and her friends, whom I spoke about earlier. These glamorous, beautiful, compelling photographs are products of this community's labour to reimagine their conditions of precarity and live beyond the constraints of their present. Oppressed people have always done this sort of work, of imagining and living otherwise, yet the nature of systemic oppression means that their work gets easily erased. So these photographs have been typically read and circulated as documentary evidence, rather than politically and artistically important interventions. This community left behind accounts and critiques of the intersectional oppressions they experienced, and these are crucial tools for understanding how dynamics they contested and conditions they reimagined continue to repeat in the present - for example, why residents are still being forcibly removed from the same area, not because of apartheid legislation but because of gentrification, anti-poor laws and a lack of state protection. However, the same dynamics render these accounts and critiques personal history rather than political theory. This means that remaining attentive to such forms of theorisation feels like swimming against the current. So whereas Edward Long set out in writing ideas that continue to shape our understanding of the very structures from which he benefited, this community's labour to transform such structures is easily erased even as the products of their labour are circulated.

**Catherine:** I think it's interesting what you say about the erasure of labour, as

this is endlessly repeated. Edward Long writes extensively about the organisation of the plantation but in doing so is erasing the work of the enslaved people who are actually hoeing the ground, planting the seed and cutting the cane. He talks about it in the passive voice as if it just gets done. The most important part of it for him is the work of thinking: the planning, organisation and management of it all. The physical labour of the thousands of people who are being worked to death just disappears from his text. I think that the disappearance of labour in so much history writing is really important to get back to. One of the good things about how historical work has changed in recent decades is that new approaches to oral history have made a big difference to what we can get at in the past. New kinds of sources, such as digital sources, using collaboration, can open up history in a way that wasn't possible before. What we hope to work on in the next phase of the project is the lives of the enslaved, through the slave registers, which are censuses of enslaved people in the decades before emancipation. These give us unique access to the lives of the enslaved, opening up a set of possibilities for exploration and discovery which are all part of reconstruction, one could say.

**Ruth:** I'm interested in this question of how language is used to erase labour. At the beginning of the book that came out of the LBS project, you explain that the language we use to discuss slave-owners now was established by slave-owners themselves - they found ways to talk about owning other people without actually talking about owning people, and the fact that we continue to do this indicates some of the ways in which they continue to ideologically inform our present.[3]

So I'm interested in the shift in language that the project makes from perpetrators to beneficiaries, which has been done successfully in post-war Germany, for example, and which points to the necessity of reparation. When we speak about beneficiaries rather than perpetrators, 'allyship' seems like an odd descriptor for what is essentially the reparative work for which beneficiaries have to be responsible. Many of us have become frustrated by the performative allyship that's emerged recently, particularly on social media, that shows how easy it is for white people to centre themselves and think about capital very simplistically, saying, for example, 'I made X donation and that's the work done'. Although the concept remains crucial, I'm wondering whether the language of allyship perhaps enables this kind of centring in a way that the language of reparations and reparative work might help us avoid. What do you think?

**Catherine:** One of the things that's fascinating about Edward Long is that he is absolutely explicit about whiteness. He talks about white people as 'White' with a capital W, and he posits the term against 'Negroes' (to avoid using the term slaves or enslaved people to describe them). So it's 'Whites' and 'Negroes', which I find fascinating because one of the things that is commonly said now is that whiteness 'disappears' because it's the norm and no one has to speak it. In the colonial period they did speak it, and very explicitly - and that enables you to see how forms of racialisation were being made at that time. They had to be specific that white skin makes the difference: you're free because you are white, you're enslaved because you are black, because you are a Negro.

Allyship does seem to me different from the hard work of thinking about reparative justice. I think that a first step towards reparation (in so far as we can) for what's happened in the past is understanding and knowing. Until we break the patterns of denial, until responsibilities are recognised and people grasp the fact that people in Britain have been beneficiaries of not just slavery, but of Empire altogether - that imperial poverty has made Britons wealthy - and that there are deep inequalities that go back so far and need to be repaired - until all this becomes accepted there is unlikely to be widespread support for reparation.

**Ruth:** In his memoir, *Familiar Stranger*, Stuart Hall writes of you, 'even when we are not actually speaking, I am in perpetual conversation with her and have been for years'.[4] This is a beautiful acknowledgement of the impact that your work and thinking had on his own, and I know that he speaks and writes about this elsewhere, particularly about the difficulty and the importance of being challenged by your involvement in the feminist movement and feminist ways of doing history. I'd love to hear your perspective on this - whether or how your work is in conversation with and shaped by his or vice versa.

**Catherine:** It makes me a little bit weepy, but yes, it was a lifelong conversation, and the thing is that it hasn't stopped, because although I don't believe in ghosts, I do believe that the dead live on in us - sometimes I just wish that he would speak to me a bit more clearly but it's very important that I remain in conversation with his ideas.

The book on Edward Long and Jamaica is absolutely in conversation with Stuart.

In the early days when we were together, I think that our paths were much more separate, but the minute that I began to work on Jamaica and colonialism, which I did in the late 1980s - from then on, it was just so important because it was a joint exploration. He was always trying to understand the present, writing the history of the present; I was writing the history of past through the present - so it was a very rich conversation that we were able to have. Some of the most wonderful times that we had together were in Jamaica when he came with me and we went exploring, which was so memorable. He was a middle-class Kingston boy and he'd never been up into the hills and seen what I wanted to see and which he was then able to discover. I learned so much from him but then, as he would say, he also did learn from me.

**Ruth:** Thank you. We have had questions sent in during our discussion. The first one is: *do you support the call for reparations for slavery as presented by Professor Hilary Beckles of the University of the West Indies?*

**Catherine:** I'm a historian and I think that the most important work that I can do is in trying to understand the past. I absolutely agree that there should be reparation from European states and that it should go into Caribbean infrastructure in particular - that's terribly important. And I also think that the work that universities do is very important, and that first and foremost, universities need to decolonise their own syllabuses, which is now very much under discussion. This is crucial to the development of a different kind of understanding of British and Imperial history for everyone

**Ruth:** Another question: *the public debate about race and history is opening up in Britain precisely as the space for humanities, history and universities is shrinking, and in a context where some simplified and essentialised narratives about race and identity are taking hold. Where else, apart from university classrooms, do you see spaces for intellectual projects about race and empire that allow for complicated narratives about our shared histories?*

**Catherine**: I suppose the answer is that there are spaces in all the different forms of public engagement that there can be. One of the things that I've been looking at recently is the artists who have been contributing hugely to these debates. I have

been looking at Hew Locke's website, at his work and what he's done. One of the projects he did was at Runnymede, where he created 'The Jurors', twelve bronze chairs at the site where the Magna Carta was debated and signed, for people to sit on and think about and discuss questions of social justice and human rights.[5] I think that is a completely different way of thinking about a public conversation on social justice. And there are also people thinking about how to have conversations in a classroom, or what can be done on television or in music. All these different ways in which ideas circulate give us ways that we can contribute, and enable us to feel we have something to offer.

**Ruth:** Next question: *I wonder when the concept 'race' emerged and whether it was part of a colonial expansion and a perceived Darwinism of the superiority of one social group: the white European male as part of an enlightenment of science.*

**Catherine:** I think it is a lot older than that, but the particular moment that I am interested in is the seventeenth and eighteenth century, in the colonial context. I think that many people would argue, as Cedric Robinson does in his book *Black Marxism*, that there is a longer history in European forms of racialisation that goes along with the decline of feudalism and the development of capitalism.[6] I think that what's really important is to try to understand the different temporalities and spatialities in which racial thinking takes place and racial hierarchies are created. It's the specificity that is so interesting and important: inequality gets reproduced again and again but in slightly different ways and patterns in relation to different populations. What you were saying earlier about the difference between South Africa and Britain brings that up so clearly. We can also think about the Caribbean and Britain, or the Irish and Britain - which is where there is another whole set of practices of racialisation which are different to what happens to people of colour. I think that racial inequalities continue to change and understanding their specificity is absolutely vital.

**Ruth:** There's one question about me: *what qualifies Ruth, above Black British academics, to partake in this discussion. I totally get Catherine, due to her excellent work in this area, but this seems like the endorsement and perpetuation of a person of colour representation that stymies the growth of black scholarship*. That's a really important question. I don't feel at all qualified above Black British academics to partake in this

discussion, and I completely share your concern about a type of BAME rhetoric that actually enables a kind of anti-blackness - when for example it involves counting numbers of 'BAME' people without questioning why or addressing the fact that none of those people are black. I am obviously aware that, although I am mixed race, there are certain ways in which I move through the world as a white person. I do also feel strongly that there is a need for non-black people of colour - and white people - to be thinking and talking about the constructions of race. Maybe I'll stop there, though I could talk a lot more about this question.

**Catherine:** And you're qualified as someone coming from South Africa who's working on important questions, and that's why we're having this conversation.

**Ruth:** Thanks, Catherine. I'll move onto the next question: *I'd love to hear Catherine say more about the distinction between perpetrator and beneficiary and what the implications of this distinction might be*.

**Catherine:** Where that debate really developed was in Germany in the period after the war, when there was a realisation that the strong focus on perpetrators was leading people to forget all the other kinds of ways that people were involved, perhaps not directly - they weren't guards in concentration camps - but they were living in streets where they were seeing Jewish people being taken away to concentration camps and they weren't stopping them. Bystanders are also necessarily implicated - we're all implicated in these systems in different ways, and recognising that is so important. The American critic Michael Rothberg talks of the notion of being implicated subjects.[7] People in Britain have benefitted from, are healthier, and have had more access to education because of living in this society, which has outsourced from and exploited other societies. This is not to say that people in this society have not been exploited, but that it has happened in different ways to how it happened across the Empire. It's important to have that sense of everyone being part of it and arguing for history being a history for all of us, not just for victims and perpetrators; it's for everyone who survives in this system. It's also about the system and how power operates in these systems and how we might begin to think about that differently.

**Ruth:** A final question: *Given that the Legacies of Slave-ownership website has had so*

*many thousands of hits per day since the BLM protests, I'm interested in its huge potential to change the national narrative in relation to white denial in a more formal way, within formal education for example. Is this something that your team has considered?*

**Catherine:** We've always worked as much as we could with different forms of public engagement, including working with teachers, which we continue to do, and there's just so much that can be done. Currently our team is very small and under-resourced, so we can only do these things in collaboration with other people. Lots of other people have been working on connected issues for a very long time, so it's not like we're struggling alone: there are generations of people that have been trying to rethink histories and trying to tackle racism and social injustice. We think of ourselves as part of that bigger project, and we try to find ways that we can work together with teachers, artists, documentary-makers, radio producers or fiction writers (I think that fiction has been so important in helping people to think about race, migration and Britain). But we're also faced with resurgent English nationalism, which is pretty uncomfortable. We're happy that the project has had an impact, but there's so much more that we need to do and continue working on, to try and tackle this dangerous resurgence.

*This is an edited version of a transcription of an online conversation entitled Legacies of British Slave Ownership, part of the Stuart Hall Foundation's #ReconstructionWork series: http://stuarthallfoundation.org/what-we-do/events/reconstructionwork-conversation-series/.*

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**Ruth Ramsden-Karelse** is founder and co-convener of the Oxford Queer Studies Network and a DPhil candidate in the English Faculty at the University of Oxford. Her research - supported by the inaugural Stuart Hall Doctoral Studentship, in association with Merton College, the Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities and the Stuart Hall Foundation - is on the world-making capacity of collaborative works by self-described gays and girls from communities formerly classified 'Coloured'

in Cape Town, South Africa, from 1950 to the present, with a specific focus on the Kewpie Photographic Collection.

## Notes

1. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/. This research project, based on data documenting the British slave-owners who received compensation after abolition, aims to deepen and broaden understanding of the cumulative weight of slave-ownership on British economic and social life/.

2. Eric Williams [1944], *Capitalism and Slavery*, University of North Carolina Press 1994.

3. Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, Rachel Lang, *Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain*, Cambridge University Press 2016.

4. Stuart Hall (with Bill Schwarz), *Familiar Stranger*, Duke University Press 2017.

5. See https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/runnymede-and-ankerwycke/hew-locke.

6. Cedric Robinson [1983], *Black Marxism*, second edition University of North Carolina Press 2000.

7. Michael Rothberg, The *Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford University Press 2019.