

HISTORIANS, ACTIVISTS AND BRITAIN'S SLAVE TRADE ABOLITION DEBATE: THE HENRY DUNDAS PLAQUE DEBACLE

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Abstract

Since the summer of 2020 debate concerning the commemoration of one of Scotland's leading eighteenth century politicians has galvanised opinions. The heart of the controversy surrounds the wording on a new heritage marker erected in 2021 at the statue of Henry Dundas (later Viscount Melville) in St Andrew Square, Edinburgh. This article does not address the complex question of whether or not Dundas was an abolitionist, but only if he can be held accountable for a delay to abolition of the British slave trade as claimed on the plaque. My overarching argument is that Sir Geoff Palmer, the key figure behind the new plaque's wording, has wrongly conflated arguments about whether or not Dundas was an abolitionist with assertions that he delayed abolition of Britain's slave trade. Through identifying the flaws in his approach to the past, I highlight the problems that arise when individuals and institutions discount, marginalise and demean professional and longstanding historical expertise. Indeed, the heritage sector is grossly undermined by the lack of rigorous scrutiny for plaques and memorials erected to serve pressure group politics. Although this controversy is about one monument in one city, it has wider ramifications for how we remember and engage with the past.

Keywords: Henry Dundas; Melville monument; slave trade abolition; Edinburgh; historiography; heritage; plaques

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Since the summer of 2020 debate concerning the commemoration of one of Scotland's leading eighteenth century politicians has galvanised opinions. The heart of the controversy surrounds the wording on a new heritage marker erected in 2021 at the statue of Henry Dundas (later Viscount Melville) in St Andrew Square, Edinburgh. Some historians query the accuracy of the final line of the plaque which attributes to Henry Dundas sole responsibility for the failure to achieve abolition of Britain's slave trade sooner than 1807: 'In 2020 this plaque was dedicated to the memory of the more than half-a-million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas's actions'. Other critics consider the entire plaque flawed since, as Guy Rowlands (2021) reveals, it ignores:

Dundas's life work and mentality ... in the round ... We should not be judging Dundas on the basis of a couple of letters, a few parliamentary manoeuvres, the views of the often-deluded and self-interested West Indian lobbyists, and one intractable situation he tried to unjam.

The debate has widened to incorporate criticism of the 'consultation' being carried out by Edinburgh City Council into the city's historic links with transatlantic slavery and colonialism. Jonathan Hearn (2022), a professor in historical sociology at the University of Edinburgh, deemed the Council's review 'strangely superficial' since it reduces 'the complexity of history, including historical persons, to mere symbols to be manipulated for the current political debates'. In response, Sir Geoff Palmer, the chair of the city council's committee (the Edinburgh Slavery and Colonialism Legacy Review Group), labelled Hearn 'a "racist" and a member of "an academic racist gang"' (Wade, 2022). In Hearn's defence, the renowned Scottish historian Sir Tom Devine accused Palmer of 'appalling slurs of racism against those whose only fault was to have a different view from his own'. He also called for Palmer's resignation as Committee chair. With no supporting evidence whatsoever, Palmer then publicly accused Devine of being both racist – 'Devine's biased, racist demand does not bother me' (Wade, 2022)¹ – and discriminatory in calling for his resignation (Lloyd, 2022). Since Palmer also chairs the University of Edinburgh's Slavery Review Group, the Principal of that institution, Peter Mathieson, was forced to clarify with him 'expectations under the university's dignity and respect policy' (Dick, 2022), but seemingly went no further in censuring the activist. Adam McVey, leader of Edinburgh City Council and part of the group of three which approved the plaque's wording (Lloyd, 2022), has likewise apparently failed to take any significant action.

Devine's demand for Palmer to resign, however, can hardly be defined as racist or discriminatory. He simply legitimately challenged Palmer's capacity

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to act impartially and with the necessary formal historical knowledge and training to assess such complex political figures from Britain's past. Devine, a Fellow of the British Academy and other national academies who was also knighted for 'services to the study of Scottish history', has not only helped to pioneer the study of Scotland's role in slavery in recent years but in the 1970s highlighted the major impact on the nation's development of the slave-based transatlantic economies (Devine, 1975, 2015; Mullen, 2022). Yet rather than engage with such a serious academic critique, Palmer, again with no evidence, has alleged he is 'a victim of "academic snobbery"', arguing historians are irked because he, with a scientific background specialising in brewing, distilling and grain, has been chosen to chair committees tackling historic issues' (Dick, 2022).

I suspect, however, that some historians have reacted strongly because of Palmer's manifest failure to adhere to accepted scholarly standards. In his probe into the wording of the plaque, investigative journalist Martyn McLaughlin (2022), writing in *The Scotsman*, laid bare the farcical process behind the text. No minutes or records exist of how and why the committee responsible for the new content reached its decision and what sources, if any, it consulted to evidence its claims. As McLaughlin incisively observed, 'This is, at best, inept, and the situation has exposed the local authority to accusations of playing fast and loose with history'. In other words, there is no fully documented and extensive scholarly information or evidence in the public domain available for examination, a fundamental principle of historical enquiry. Nor has membership of the City Council committee beyond its chair been published (Horne, 2022; Lloyd, 2022), ironically, given Palmer's accusations, to protect them from online abuse.

Palmer has also repeatedly misrepresented the published views of historians and historical evidence and failed to accept the current historiographical and academic consensus that Henry Dundas was not solely responsible for Britain's failure to achieve immediate abolition of its slave trade (McCarthy, 2022; Richardson 2022; Rowlands, 2021). A range of individuals and groups agitated against abolition including, but not limited to, royalty and those with West Indian interests:

In the 1790s the antiabolitionist alliance included the king and royal family; the admirals of the navy; leading commercial interests in London, Liverpool, and Bristol; and above all, many landed proprietors who feared any innovation that might weaken the empire, raise taxes, or set a precedent for more dangerous reforms.

(Davis, 1975: 102–3)

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Such opposition was the result of many profound anxieties about national military, naval and economic security during war with France as well as the danger of national political discontent triggered by the ideas of the French Revolution. As David Richardson (2022: 228) recently argued, ‘the global fallout from demands for liberty, equality, and fraternity in France in 1789 strengthened the hand of the West Indian interest and its allies in resisting efforts to outlaw the British slave trade for most of the period through 1807.’

This article focuses on the debacle surrounding the new Henry Dundas plaque in Edinburgh to highlight the problems that arise when individuals and institutions discount, marginalise and demean professional and longstanding historical expertise. I draw on the limited and selective sources that Palmer has put forward to try to justify the plaque’s wording along with other materials, including extracts from abolitionist William Wilberforce’s diaries and correspondence. I do not deal with the complex question of whether or not Dundas was an abolitionist, but only if he can be held accountable for a delay to abolition of the British slave trade as claimed on the plaque and through Geoff Palmer’s social media interventions. My overarching argument is that Palmer has wrongly conflated arguments about whether or not Dundas was an abolitionist with assertions that he delayed abolition of Britain’s slave trade. Dundas certainly opposed immediate abolition, and dispute exists as to why he did so, but the evidence confirms he was not solely responsible for its delay. Although this controversy is about one monument in one city, it has wider ramifications for how we remember and engage with the past.

Primary Sources

On 2 April 1792, in the House of Commons, Henry Dundas, as with others, spoke in response to William Wilberforce’s motion for immediate abolition. This came a year after Wilberforce’s earlier motion had met with robust defeat. Dundas (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1106–10) spoke of regulations to procure abolition including regulations ‘to promote the increase and encouragement of the breed of native negroes in the West Indies’, end hereditary slavery, ease the conditions of the enslaved, and educate and rear children including in religion and morality. As historian Dale Porter (1970: 81) put it, Dundas accepted emancipation ‘as the ultimate goal, and argued that abolition [of the slave trade] was only one in a series of measures which ought to be taken to realize it’. Opposition Whig MP Charles James Fox (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1116) ridiculed Dundas’s suggestions, including that of emancipation, but nonetheless Dundas went on to propose ‘That the Slave Trade ought *gradually*

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to be abolished.' After further speeches, the vote to carry Dundas's amendment was carried by 230 to 85, the first slave trade abolition motion to pass in the Commons.

However, Palmer's regularly repeated position is that Dundas's 'gradual' amendment to William Wilberforce's motion for abolition of Britain's slave trade means he was solely accountable for the delay in ending the trafficking of enslaved people. As he (2022a) writes of Dundas: 'he initiated the "1792 delay in abolition", he alone is responsible'. Palmer (2022b) further contends 'the evidence of Prime Minister Pitt, Fox MP, Abolitionist Clarkson, CLR James and Devine ... suggests that Dundas' "gradual" abolition was akin to "gradual" murder'. Palmer's citation (2022c) from Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger dates from his speech on 2 April 1792 when he stated that gradual abolition was like waiting 'till a thousand favourable circumstances unite' which Palmer states meant never. His paraphrasing of Fox's remarks that gradual abolition was akin to gradual murder emerged from the same parliamentary session (Great Britain, 1792: 167, 115).

Palmer's assertions, however, are groundless since he only refers to debates in the House of Commons on 2 April 1792 and fails to account for various developments during that month. With the vote for gradual abolition approved, Prime Minister Pitt applauded the Commons for agreeing to condemn the trade, while accepting that differences existed over the timeframe for abolition (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1134). In his correspondence from 3 April to Mr Hey, Wilberforce (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 1: 346) acknowledged parliament's decision: 'We carried a motion however afterwards for gradual Abolition, against the united forces of Africans and West Indians, by a majority of 238 to 85'. Wilberforce admitted, however, to feeling 'hurt and humiliated' and was determined to 'force the gradual Abolitionists in *their* Bill (for I will never myself bring forward a parliamentary license to rob and murder) to allow as short a term as possible, and under as many limitations'. The following day in the Commons, Dundas (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1174) suggested to Wilberforce that he 'bring in his bill upon his own principle for an immediate abolition; and when it was before the House, such alterations might be moved, as would give it all the operation which the resolution voted by the House was calculated to give to it.' Fox argued against this stating, 'Those who proposed and supported a gradual abolition, knew, or thought they knew, the means of carrying it into effect, and it was their duty to do so' (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1174–5). Mr Hey advised Wilberforce (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 1: 346), 'you will undoubtedly have the advantage in being the corrector, rather than the proposer, of the Bill. What you propose would probably be curtailed in some degree. Whatever others propose you will probably be able to modify.'

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Since immediate abolitionists failed to take up the offer to put forward their own proposals, Dundas set out his twelve resolutions on 23 April 1792. Although Dundas was the spokesperson for these suggestions, it is unlikely that he made such recommendations without consulting Pitt (Hague, 2005: 301–2; Lipscomb, 1967: 115). Dundas (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1208, 1213–17) noted that abolitionists would only accept a maximum five year delay while opponents wanted a further 10 years operation of the trade. Dundas suggested that a compromise gradual abolition take place, with Britain's role in the foreign slave trade to end in 1793 (cutting almost half the trade) and all importation of Africans to Britain's colonies in ships owned or navigated by British subjects to terminate in 1800. He further recommended only permitting ships currently employed in the African trade to continue trafficking in the interim, regulating the age and gender of Africans, declaring the destination and implementing penalties for ships contradicting certain regulations, levying duties to be paid to colonial legislatures, making illegal the importation of Africans to America from any foreign island, limiting the tonnage of ships, considering the financial losses to those involved in the trade, punishing any British subject guilty of any outrage, and presenting an address to the King designed to encourage him to reach a general agreement with other foreign powers for complete abolition. Dundas further noted that in following 'the principles of justice, humanity and sound policy' to take measures to accomplish this 'important object, we shall enter on the pursuit of those measures with additional satisfaction, from the hope and persuasion that his majesty will be enabled, by the prudence and wisdom of the respective colonial legislatures, to adopt such regulations' as 'promoting their internal population, and gradually improving the condition of the negroes'. Since these 'particular regulations' were the 'proper province of the colonial legislatures, we have not thought it proper to make them the subject of our deliberations'.

Historian Dale Porter (1970: 141, 49) deemed these proposals understandable in helping the enslaved but at the same time not undermining the British economy. Further, he considered that the cut-off date for these proposals did not depend on planter cooperation since if they had not prepared for termination of the trade in 1800 it was their own fault. Pitt had also a few years earlier 'established the principle of compensation for commercial damages arising out of a measure relating to the slave trade.' From Dundas's perspective, as reported by Bishop Porteus, the abolitionist Bishop of London, who sat in the House of Lords, the West Indian legislatures in 1792 were open to gradual abolition: '*Mr. Dundas himself told me that the West India Planters and Merchants would have acquiesced in the annihilation of the trade in the year 1800*' (Anstey, 1975: 319; italics are Anstey's).

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Two days after Dundas presented the 1792 proposals (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1261), Pitt noted that 'if it was not in their power, as might happen' to achieve immediate abolition 'what could they do but accept of the most speedy means that they could get to make the abolition certain and effectual?' Fox (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1272) likewise indicated that 'he should vote for the abolition at the end of a short period, if he could not carry the immediate abolition'.

On 27 April 1792, after much deliberation, the House of Commons voted by 151 votes to 132 to end the slave trade in 1796. The following day Wilberforce (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 1: 349) wrote that although defeated in an attempt to fix abolition for January 1795 'we carried the first of January, 1796'. He further stated, 'On the whole this is more than I expected two months ago, and I have much cause for thankfulness. We are to contend for the number of slaves to be imported; and *then for the House of Lords.*' In response to these developments, Dundas declared (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1293) that since immediate abolitionists had altered his plan to make it their own they should form the regulations and bring in the abolition bill.

Prime Minister Pitt therefore moved to keep five of Dundas's twelve resolutions but with modifications and amendments. The resolutions retained were: banning the foreign trade 'from and after a Time to be limited', limiting the trade to ships already trafficking, imposing a bond, making unlawful the import of slaves to the West Indies from foreign territories, and tonnage restrictions (Report, 1792). Some years later, in 1795 (Cobbett, vol. 31: 1323), Wilberforce stated that the propositions were not crude or hasty and the House of Commons had reached them after long and close inquiry and the fullest discussion. That same year, Fox (Cobbett, vol. 31: 1334) acknowledged that abolition had been voted on by compromise and that advocates for abolition had as great a right to an equal share of the benefit of that compromise as opponents. Wilberforce reiterated these claims in 1798 asserting that the resolutions were not sudden:

... but the result of a most diligent and laborious examination, by a committee, during a great part of three sessions of parliament. The reports of this committee were weighed, and scrutinized, and followed by long and repeated discussions within these walls.

(Cobbett, vol. 34: 1377)

Despite all these negotiations, the 1792 measure was placed on hold in the House of Lords while they conducted an enquiry, abandoned in 1794, the same year they rejected a bill passed in the Commons to abolish the slave trade to foreign territories. A decade later, the Lords again rejected an abolition bill that passed in the Commons (Lipscomb, 1967: 93–96).

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These developments reveal unambiguous collective acceptance of political necessity, however unpalatable it was for immediate abolitionists, for some degree of gradual abolition. That acceptance included figures such as Wilberforce himself. Other forms of gradualism had been considered previously and the abolition petition campaign generated after the defeat of the 1791 abolition motion likely included signatures from members of the public who did not advocate immediate abolition (Porter: 1970, 79–80). As Wilberforce stated to the clerical abolitionist Thomas Gisborne, ‘The terms of your petition ought to be such as to allow of a man’s signing it who rather recoils from the idea of immediate Abolition’ (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 1: 337).

British politicians were also aware of recent developments in Denmark where efforts were underway to abolish the slave trade, reform slavery, and improve the condition of the enslaved. Discussions there also drew on knowledge of events in Britain. In December 1791, a report directed to the Danish King advocated banning the export of enslaved people from Africa in 1803 but to allow importation in the interim to ensure there were sufficient numbers of enslaved in the Danish West Indies when the ban came into effect. The report further encouraged the import of enslaved women to balance the gender demographics in the islands, propagation of the Gospel, lawful wedlock and the education of children. The architect of the scheme, a plantation owner who favoured abolition, attributed British abolitionists’ difficulties to a focus on immediate rather than gradual abolition. The eventual Danish edict made no mention of emancipation, presumably to avert the opposition of planters (Gøbel: 2001: 251–64; Røge, 2014: 576–92). Dundas similarly avoided reference to emancipation in his twelve resolutions of 23 April 1792 despite having earlier raised that prospect. Further, the Danish discussions noted that success of the initiatives relied on the cooperation of planters (Gøbel: 2016: 133).

Denmark’s king approved the recommendations on 24 February 1792 and news of the edict of 16 March 1792 reached London by the end of the month. That edict included restrictions on Danish ships, only allowing in the interim period foreign nations to ship slaves to the Danish West Indies, aligning the export of sugar to foreign places with every slave imported, imposing duties, and preventing the export of slaves from the West Indies. Denmark’s gradual delay covered a decade, with more slaves taken from Africa than ever before. The Danish slave trade was outlawed from January 1803, the first country in Europe to do so, though, as with Britain, slaves were imported illegally after the ban (Gøbel: 2001: 251–64; Røge, 2014: 576–92).

Europe-wide antislavery debates all shaped one another, as did Atlantic revolutions and slave revolts. It is therefore likely that Dundas was influenced by the Danish recommendations, particularly given the similarities apparent from

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his comments on 2 April and his proposals of 23 April. Further, his reference to the need for cooperation from West Indian planters presumably stemmed not only from developments in Denmark but also from King George III's stance on the West Indies and previous debates around abolition in 1789 when 'West Indian colonists threatened to declare independence or to remove to some foreign territory with all their goods and slaves' (Porter, 1970: 66). West Indian planters had, after all, long advocated for their rights and had a long history of resisting 'metropolitan authority' (Petley, 2017: 63). The most assertive of the colonial legislatures was Jamaica which, economically and politically, reached its zenith between the 1750s and 1807 (Burnard, 2020: 8). After war with France broke out in 1793, Jamaica provided crucial financial resources for Britain's prolonged war effort (Watson, 1995: 92; Petley, 2017: 67). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Dundas was alert to these issues and sought to find a workable solution to appease different and highly divisive opposing factions.

Palmer, however, seems oblivious to these key developments in the Commons in 1792. He also dismisses the ongoing consistent and robust hostility of the House of Lords to any form of abolition (or any reform measure) together with opposition from the royal family – including seven adult sons of George III who took up their seats in the Lords. Indeed, while contemporaries in the Commons noted Dundas's opposition to immediate abolition, those MPs who advocated for abrupt abolition of the slave trade referred repeatedly to the actions of other politicians, acknowledged decisions made by 'the House', and raised concerns about obstruction and resistance in the House of Lords. And, when Dundas spoke in 1796 (the year the trade was supposed to end) to oppose – but not vote against – immediate abolition, Wilberforce admitted to being 'Very much vexed and incensed at our opponents', but ultimately blamed the bill's failure in the Commons on his own supporters being 'absent the country, or on pleasure' (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol, 1: 142). Indeed, Stephen Farrell (2007:145) has characterised the period as one of 'a dreary catalogue of lost opportunities, except insofar as it provided those parliamentarians sympathetic to abolition with plenty of time to learn from their mistakes'.

Thomas Clarkson, the early abolitionist historian, was among those contemporaries who noted Dundas's opposition to abolition in 1796 and 1799 (1808: 486). Palmer (2022d), however, cites Clarkson as having stated Dundas was 'the chief instrument' against Wilberforce's abolition without clarifying that Clarkson's (1808: 488) comment related to 1799. If Dundas, at that time Secretary of State for War, was indeed the main culprit in 1799 for events in the Commons (though no reference to this appears in the published life of Wilberforce by his sons), it does not follow that general abolition would

have met with success otherwise. There remained opposition from the Lords and some members of the royal family, including the King and the Duke of Clarence (later King William IV), as well as other individuals and groups, including members of the Pitt coalition ministry in place from 1794 who were opposed to any form of abolition (Anstey, 1975: 412). The Slave Limiting Bill that same year passed in the Commons but failed in the Lords due to opposition and blunders. Wilberforce's sons (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 2: 338), who had access to their father's diaries, stated that Lord Grenville, advocating for the bill, 'was exposed to severe opposition in the upper House' with the 'repeated opposition of one member of the royal family, the commercial sagacity of Lord Liverpool, and the sturdy bluntness of Lord Thurlow'. The Wilberforce siblings (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 3: 163), in their history of their father's role in the abolition movement, had also observed in 1796 that fear of French principles 'was at its height' leading the Commons to be 'deeply prejudiced against any change in our Colonial system'.

Opposition towards abolition measures from members of the royal family and many Lords had also played a part in earlier and later years. In May 1792 the Duke of Clarence (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1349–50) made his maiden speech challenging the evidence of the Commons for abolition of the slave trade and stating that obedience to the lower House 'would render the House of Peers useless ... This he never would endure.' Wilberforce (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol 3: 182) had expressed pain at seeing 'in the House of Lords, four of the Royal Family come down to vote against the poor, helpless, friendless Slaves'. In 1807, he wrote also of 'The Princes canvassing against us', a reference to the Dukes of Clarence and Sussex being openly against the Bill and 'speaking, as it was understood, the sentiments of all the reigning family' (Wilberforce and Wilberforce, 1839, vol. 3: 291). Opposition leader Fox had also reckoned there would be no hope of achieving abolition during the reign of George III (Davis, 1975: 440). Historians have further emphasised the role of members of the royal family in extending the slave trade and slavery (Schwarz, 2016). David Armitage (2022: 20) has recently stated that the King's 'consistent attachment to property rights and belief in the true sources of his empire's prosperity led him to set his face against any reform of the slave trade'. H.T. Dickinson (2011: 410) has elaborated further upon the King's actions:

When the campaign to abolish the slave trade became a major issue for 20 years, both inside and outside parliament, the king refused to let Pitt make abolition cabinet policy. His sons, especially the duke of Clarence, played an important role in the house of lords in opposing the abolition of the slave trade in the early 1790s and George himself made it very

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clear that he thought such a proposal would damage the national interest. He mobilised peers and MPs in both Houses to vote against abolition proposals.

Memories of the American revolutionary war of 1775–83, together with the revolutionary fervour of the later eighteenth century, 'ensured that George III and his entourage would become consistent allies of the West India interest in resisting slave trade abolition' (Richardson, 2022: 229).

Secondary Sources

Apart from misusing isolated snippets of evidence and failing to situate them in the broader context of the time, there is little evidence that Palmer has consulted the historiography surrounding the end of Britain's role in the slave trade. Rather, he (Palmer 2022e) has cited C.L.R. James to try to support his stance. But James (1963: 200), who noted that Dundas opposed a motion for abolition on 18 February 1796, did not hold Dundas singularly responsible for a failure to obtain early abolition of the slave trade.

In taking aim at Dundas, Palmer avoids the scholarship that has considered the influence of other individuals from the period, including that of Prime Minister William Pitt. As with Dundas, Pitt's actions around abolition have generated considerable debate, both among contemporaries and historians. On the one hand, some blamed Pitt for the failure to achieve abolition while others reckoned he lacked the political means to bring it to fruition (Lipscomb, 1967: 87–8). William Wilberforce has likewise come under fire from historians, including Dale Porter who drew attention to the abolitionist's stubbornness that 'contributed to the series of defeats he suffered between 1792 and 1800'. Fiona Spiers (1985: 51–54) has pointed to discrepancies with Wilberforce's memories, his introduction of abolition motions late in the session with limited time to ensure their passage, and a failure to consistently ensure support was at hand.

In his historiographical reflections on the debate about Pitt's part in the failure to achieve immediate abolition, Lipscomb (1967: 119) concluded that significant political obstacles blocked abolition, though more research was required on Pitt's own role:

The limited eighteenth-century concept of the functions of government, the absence of cabinet unanimity, the powerful opposition of the Lords, the King, and the slave trade interest, the strength of the courtier

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interest, and the weakness of Pitt's personal following have all rightly been cited as obstacles to abolition.

This echoes the earlier comment of Henry Brougham (1839: 201–2), a later abolitionist of slavery, who reckoned Pitt:

... was not so zealous as to risk anything, to sacrifice anything, or even to give himself an extraordinary trouble for the accomplishment of his purpose. The Court was decidedly against abolition; George III always regarded the question with abhorrence ... The peers were of the same opinion.

Here, then, we see that attempts to hold one person – Pitt – accountable for the failure to achieve abolition quickly collapses when other factors are brought into play, just as we see with attempts to hold Dundas responsible. Such analysis needs to be set in the broader context of the time, taking account of many factors which helped prevent both immediate and gradual abolition including radicalism, belief in reliance on the West Indies for British prosperity, and opposition from the Lords, royal family, and parliamentarians (Anstey, 1975: 407–412). Further, as James Walvin (1986: 116–7) has argued, in a climate of international upheaval and domestic agitation, there was 'a generalised dismissal of all forms of reform'. Such an environment generated a 'mood swing in Parliament' wherein 'slave trade abolition, if not regulation, drifted down the national political agenda through 1799 and fell out of it altogether in 1800–1803 as circumstances dictated' (Richardson, 2022: 217). The effect of these broader factors in influencing individual actions cannot be underestimated.

A further piece of evidence that Palmer (Mackay, 2021: 35) has used to buttress his opinion that Dundas delayed abolition of Britain's slave trade is Tom Devine's (2015: 31) claim that Dundas's 'parliamentary intervention in 1792 arguing for gradual abolition of the slave trade effectively killed off reform for a generation'. Devine's remark carries no reference but appears to have been drawn from Iain Whyte (2006: 89) who wrote that Dundas was 'the proposer of the amendment in Parliament that was to effectively delay abolition for nearly two decades'. While Whyte states that Dundas proposed the amendment, he does not appear to hold him responsible. Furthermore, Devine (Mackay, 2021: 35, 64) has publicly retracted his early view since he did not 'look at the totality of the period' and the influence of 'very potent historical developments and forces which ensured [abolition] couldn't happen'. Devine's current opinion is emphatic: the slave trade would have continued because 'forces political, economic and military were so potent that there was no way a British government would want to get abolition over the line'.

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If, as Palmer claims, Devine's statement was a key source for his opinion, then it was incumbent upon him to take notice of Devine's retraction. That retraction is also the reason why I do not refer to Devine's earlier comment, another charge Palmer has levied against me (2022f). Palmer's criticism here seemingly shows unawareness of the changing nature of historical interpretation as a result of further reflection by scholars, the discovery of new sources, revisiting old sources with new questions to hand, and the deployment of new methodologies.

Palmer (2022g) has similarly alleged on social media that I have failed to mention Henry Dundas's impeachment. This is not so: I specifically referred to it in my previous article in this journal (McCarthy, 2022: 147). However, unlike Palmer (Mackay, 2021: 64; Palmer, 2022h) I do not deem that Dundas's impeachment in 1805 and subsequent trial in 1806 led in 1807 to the end of the slave trade. Indeed, there is no evidence whatsoever for that deduction. We teach history students not to make such lazy assumptions and to avoid the fallacy that because an event occurs after a first event it does not follow that the former had any causal effect on the latter. If Palmer has evidence to the contrary, then he should reveal it. Indeed, in contrast to Palmer, Clarkson (1808: 500) noted that Dundas's impeachment in 1805 prevented 'bringing in a bill for the abolition of the foreign part of the Slave trade.'

By focusing on Dundas's impeachment, Palmer overlooks other happenings in the early 1800s. With Pitt's resignation as Prime Minister in 1801, a ministry even more hostile to abolition was in place until Pitt's return to that position in 1804. Yet even that year and the next, efforts to achieve abolition continued to fail. Indeed, rather than Dundas's impeachment, contemporaries and later commentators have pointed to developments that followed quickly from Pitt's death in 1806. Lord Grenville, now Prime Minister, sat, significantly, in the Lords and led the way with new political strategies which included introducing the abolition bill first in the upper and then in the lower House. Elsewhere (McCarthy, 2022), and drawing on the work of leading historians, I have briefly noted a range of other factors that helped get abolition across the line, including the role of renewed public support for the cause. As Seymour Drescher (2012: 588–9) put it:

... [abolitionist] victories never came at moments of acute internal or external crisis. They came at moments of relative calm, before or after Britain had successfully weathered severe threats – in 1806–1807 ... In turn, abolitionism endured moments of quiescence when Britain was most challenged by internal or external threats in the revolutionary 1790s.

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While in this article I do not interrogate Dundas's abolitionist tendencies or lack of them, it is worth highlighting that some developments and suggestions in 1806 and 1807 harked back to the twelve resolutions Dundas presented to the Commons in 1792 (Porter: 1970, 141). In May 1806 the Foreign Slave Trade Bill passed, which prevented British ships from supplying slaves to foreign powers. This was a key aspect of Dundas' earlier resolutions which he intended would end the foreign trade in 1793. The resolution for the 1806 bill noted the trade was 'contrary to the principles of justice, humanity and sound policy', the same words incorporated in Dundas's 1792 resolutions. In July 1806 abolitionists further moved to restrict additional vessels entering the trade and proposed addressing the King to negotiate with foreign powers in order to obtain their concurrence in effecting general abolition. Grenville had also mooted the idea of imposing high duties on slave imports though this was not included in the bill (Anstey, 1975: 367–380).

More than half a century ago, Dale Porter (1970: 81) stated that the question of Dundas's sincerity over abolition may never be known. Dundas (Cobbett, vol 32: 751, 876, 879) claimed in the Commons to oppose immediate abolition for various reasons including issues of security, financial repercussions for planters, and concerns that without planters' cooperation slaves would be smuggled to the British West Indies on foreign ships. While not discounting Dundas's actions in opposing immediate abolition, his efforts in 1792 need to be viewed in the context of restraints put upon him. For instance, in June 1816, Wilberforce acknowledged that Dundas had regretted that abolitionists 'had not concerned themselves for the West India slaves, as well as the Africans. He did not actually carry a motion, for we carried the question against him' (Hansard, 1816: 1156). Almost a decade later, the abolitionist Prince William Frederick, Duke of Gloucester, acknowledged that Dundas was correct to argue for an end to slavery rather than the slave trade (Anti-Slavery Society, 1825: 69). The response of MPs in the Commons to Dundas's 2 April 1792 speech, along with Wilberforce's rejection of presenting a proposal to the Commons for gradual abolition, led to Dundas proposing resolutions based on the Denmark edict. That plan, too, was rejected, even though Denmark would go on to abolish its trade. All this suggests the need for a painstaking, forensic, and impartial analysis of Dundas's actions – and those of other individuals – surrounding abolition of Britain's slave trade, including a fuller investigation of Dundas's opposition to immediate abolition beyond statements in the public record. Such an interrogation would need to draw on the personal documents of a range of individuals and groups while staying alert to their agendas.

Conclusion

Henry Dundas's actions in opposing immediate abolition after 1792 help explain the negative views towards him from abolitionists and later commentators. Others disliked him due to his personality and methods (Brown, 1998: 269). Anti-Scottishness was a further factor in denigration of his character (Pentland, 2011). Yet Dundas's opposition to immediate abolition of the slave trade does not mean his actions delayed abolition. Indeed, the key problem with Palmer's approach to Henry Dundas is his conflation of arguments about whether or not Dundas was an abolitionist with assertions that he delayed abolition of the trade. This can be seen throughout his social media tweets including a recent attack on me (Palmer, 2022i) asserting that I fail to mention 'Dundas' abolition-actions, because there were none.' Whether or not Dundas was an abolitionist was not the focus of my earlier article nor is it the focus of this current one. Indeed, Palmer's attacks on me similarly fail to directly engage with my *Scottish Affairs* article at all.

In all his interventions on this topic, Palmer has failed to adhere to accepted scholarly standards followed by many disciplines. First, he has cherry-picked selective quotations from contemporaries and distorted or oversimplified them without due attention to the wider context. Second, he has overlooked material relating to other individuals and broader forces operating during this period in history. Third, he has failed to accept the reasons historians set forth for the eventual achievement of British abolition of the slave trade, inferring instead that it arose due to Dundas's impeachment. Fourth, he has denounced and tried to smear expert views as racist and/or biased rather than engage with their findings. All this serves to provide a questionable soundbite interpretation of the past devoid of complexity.

While some, including scholars (Hearn, 2022) and Dundas family links (the HD Historic Scotland Committee), deem Dundas an abolitionist, albeit one who favoured a gradual approach, there is no debate about Palmer's claim that Dundas was responsible for delayed abolition: the historical evidence and research is overwhelming that he was not. It is further undeniable that 'historical realities were much more nuanced and complex in the slave trade abolition debates of the 1790s and early 1800s than a focus on the role and significance of one politician suggests' (McCarthy, 2022: 149).

Because of his partial and unconvincing track record on these issues, the recommendations of the two committees chaired by Palmer will likely be open to fundamental criticism when they are published. The way forward becomes even more disconcerting if feedback from Edinburgh residents who responded to the city's review of its links to slavery and colonialism favours placing

contextual information on landmarks associated with slavery. The review group and attached advisory group overseeing the process comprise (anonymous) community leaders, arts professionals, council employees, volunteers, and people working in equalities, justice, and built heritage conservation. To leave these matters solely in the hands of individuals with no formal historical training or research experience in the field may result, as with the Dundas plaque wording, in further misinformation about the past.

For Robert Poll (2022), founder of Save our Statues, 'We have entered a dangerous new era for the study of history, where debate is increasingly controlled, its terms of reference defined by one group with one particular agenda.' According to Poll, Palmer prefers 'to project his own version of history onto them. And it very much is *his* version of history. The [Edinburgh Council] review has descended into chaos'. In this sense, Poll's perspective reiterates broader concerns in public history that plaques have become 'unadulterated propaganda'.

Concerned with the present moment, and influenced by contemporary politics, such reinterpretations overlook the complexity of the past. Consequently, the heritage sector is being grossly undermined by the lack of rigorous scrutiny for plaques and memorials erected to serve pressure group politics. Such plaques are often opinion-based heritage, rather than fact-based heritage. If such re-interpretation is to continue then there is an urgent need for a collective cohort of eminent professional historians with longstanding expertise in their fields to be fully involved in assessing the wording on plaques, but only after impartial and careful scrutiny of the range and depth of relevant evidence, both contemporary to the period and later historiography.

Eminent and skilled historians of such matters are not hard to find. For example, the Wilberforce Institute at the University of Hull is the leading UK research centre on slavery both past and present. Its three past and present directors (Trevor Burnard, John Oldfield, and David Richardson) are all internationally renowned historians of the slave trade, slavery and antislavery. Similarly, there is a need to include input from political historians. If they are to avoid a humiliating public fiasco at the end of their process of review, Edinburgh City Council and Edinburgh University would do well to approach the Wilberforce Institute, or a similarly scholarly body or group of historians, to oversee the research on these contentious matters.

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Note

1. See also Tom Devine, 'Institutions stood silent while I was defamed as a Racist', *The Times*, 2 February 2022; John Lloyd, 'The great delayer', *Prospect*, April 2022, 34–38; Marc Home, 'Historian Devine demands action over racism "slur"', *The Times*, 2 February 2022, p. 15; Nan Spowart, 'Devine in doubt over "impartiality" of plaque review', *The National*, 20 February 2022, p. 8; Iain Macwhirter, 'Scottish universities are debased by groundless accusations of racism', *The Herald*; Ben Sixsmith, 'Slaves to Bad History', *The Critic*, March 2022, p. 19.

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