Scottish Affairs 31.2 (2022): 133–153
DOI: 10.3366/scot.2022.0404

www.euppublishing.com/scot

BAD HISTORY: THE CONTROVERSY OVER HENRY DUNDAS AND THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE

Angela McCarthy

Abstract

How far do individuals determine events and how much agency do they have? In March 2021, Edinburgh City Council approved plans to install a new plaque on the Melville monument in Edinburgh, Scotland, part of which refers to 'the more than half-a-million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas's actions'. These words on the plaque serve to hold Dundas (later Lord Melville) solely accountable for the consequences of a parliamentary vote taken in the House of Commons in 1792 on the gradual delay of the British slave trade. This article interrogates the historical controversy surrounding Henry Dundas's role in abolition of the British slave trade with a focus on two main areas. First, it contradicts claims that historians unequivocally agree that Dundas delayed abolition. Second, it explores arguments that Dundas's mobilisation of Scottish votes and oratorical skills ensured continuation of the slave trade. The article argues that historical realities were much more nuanced and complex in the slave trade abolition debates than a focus on the role and significance of one politician suggests. Edinburgh City Council therefore have the urgent moral duty to remove the plaque. Otherwise, the city faces the grave charge and international opprobrium of falsifying history on a public monument.

Keywords: Henry Dundas; Melville monument; slave trade abolition; Britain; politics; historiography

---

Angela McCarthy is Professor of Scottish and Irish History and Director of the Centre for Global Migrations at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Angela McCarthy

Introduction

In March 2021, Edinburgh City Council approved plans to install a new plaque on the Melville monument in St Andrew Square, Edinburgh. Part of the text referred to 'the more than half-a-million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas's actions' (the full text can be found in the Appendix). A leading figure in the government of Prime Minister William Pitt, Dundas (later Lord Melville) was Secretary of State for the Home Office (1791–4), Secretary of War (1794–1801), and First Lord of the Admiralty (1804–5). He spoke during parliamentary debates on abolition of the British slave trade, including in 1792 when he proposed a motion for gradual delay when the House of Commons was set to reject William Wilberforce's proposal for abolition. Final abolition of the British slave trade did not take place until 1807. The words on the plaque hold Dundas solely accountable for this delay.

Agreement on the new text has a troubled past. Dundas's most recent biographer, Michael Fry, was one of two individuals initially delegated to draft the 'form of words' for the plaque after a petition with only 264 signatures had been submitted to Edinburgh City Council in 2016.[1] Fry (2020: 12) subsequently claimed that the other committee member failed to respond to his proposals and that 'agreement to any single interpretation of Dundas's versatile career was proving impossible'. By 2020, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, the *Edinburgh Evening News* (Hay, 2020) reported that a 'committee of historians [sic], including Sir Geoff [Palmer], is currently locked in an acrimonious dispute about what should be said on the plaque, which was expected to be installed on the monument about two years ago by the council.' The original committee members were not notified that a new group, comprising city councillors, Palmer, and input from a University of Edinburgh senior academic (none of whom are historians), had been formed to finalise the wording (Fry 2020: 12; Devine 2020: 22). At this point, Sir Tom Devine (2020: 22), widely regarded as the leading historian of modern Scotland, strongly criticised this tactic, likening the group to 'a kangaroo court' with 'A loaded "jury" [rushing] to judgment on a complex set of questions without taking the advice of any real expert.'

There is a strong possibility that this initiative in Edinburgh influenced an investigation in Toronto, Canada, into the renaming there of Dundas Street, the city's main thoroughfare. In July 2021, following a petition of almost 14,000 signatories and subsequent 'consultation', Toronto city council officials proceeded to change the street name. An opinion piece in the *Toronto Star* (Saul, 2021) proclaimed, 'Through his [Dundas's] personal pro slave

interventions 574,370 more slaves were taken in Africa'. *The Times* (Leask, 2021) likewise reported that 'Dundas, who was ennobled as the first Viscount Melville, prolonged the slave trade for a decade and a half, enabling the trafficking of hundreds of thousands of Africans.'

In a recent article in the *Scottish Historical Review (SHR)*, Stephen Mullen (2021a: 220, 234, 248) has similarly stated that 'If it is proven that Dundas delayed abolition, he was guilty of a political strategy with catastrophic consequences for African people forcibly trafficked into chattel slavery'. Mullen acknowledged, however, that 'it was the house of lords that extinguished abolition in 1792', that gradual abolition 'was the collective will of the British parliament', and that 'Dundas used his influence … to delay indefinitely' for a range of reasons including to protect British and colonial economic, imperial, strategic and military interests. Yet beyond these conjectures, Mullen (2021a: 248, 245) has attempted to hold Dundas solely responsible for the process of political delay: 'It is a matter of the historical record that his insertion of gradual delayed the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade from 1792 until 1807'; 'Without his practical opposition, immediate abolition could have passed earlier'; and 'Dundas's strategy prolonged the transatlantic slave trade which facilitated an increase of the enslaved population'. For Mullen (2021b; my emphasis), in a blogpost published after the *SHR* article, Dundas was not just 'a great delayer' of abolition, but 'the great delayer' par excellence. Mullen ramped up his claims against Dundas by asserting, 'There is no historiographical controversy about Henry Dundas' culpability in delaying abolition' and 'The activist position (that Henry Dundas delayed abolition) is not one based upon "rewriting history" but the arguments are broadly consistent with the published work of academic historians going back to 1975.' He has further pushed this view on a Twitter account (Mullen: 2021c): 'Historians of slavery and abolition who have substantiated their views in academic writing are unequivocal that Dundas delayed abolition. The plaque wording reflects that orthodoxy'.

Mullen's conclusions raise the long-debated question of how far significant individuals in history determine events and how much agency they have, unencumbered by other influences in the broader context of their time. In his attempt to answer this question, Sir Ian Kershaw (2004: 9–12) offered a valuable and succinct summary of the impersonal and structural forces of historical change as well as the role of the individual in influencing them. While acknowledging the challenges of postmodernism and representations of the past that prioritise individual actions rather than overarching explanations, he argued that events have complex causes and that social and political forces shape individual actions. To demonstrate his thesis, Kershaw deployed case

studies of Adolf Hitler and Margaret Thatcher, among others, to show that we cannot assess individual actions without considering other elements beyond their control. As he revealed of Thatcher, her supporters propagated the myth that she alone overrode all opposition to bring about radical change.

Devine, after learning of the content of the new Dundas plaque, scorned those seeking to present Dundas as some 'kind of superman, a titan who single-handedly managed to produce this extraordinary historical result of postponing abolition.' Rather, according to him, 'even if Dundas had never existed as an individual or high-ranking politician', the slave trade would have continued through the 1790s 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' (Mackay, 2021: 64, 35). In his assessment, those key forces included: the insurrection of enslaved people on Saint-Domingue and the subsequent alarm in Britain; war with France and the strategic importance of the West Indies in that conflict, such as customs revenues from Caribbean trades supporting the war effort; the economic benefit for Britain derived from the slave trade; and unrelenting opposition from the House of Lords and King George III. Devine (2020: 22–3) has therefore denounced as 'bad history' the quote on the Edinburgh plaque which attributes the enslavement of more than half a million Africans to Dundas's actions alone. He is not the only historian to express such concerns. Guy Rowlands (2021), Professor of History at St Andrews, has also judged the plaque 'deeply misleading' and 'egregiously unfair' in seeking to make Dundas 'public enemy number one for the enslavement of another half-a-million Africans' and to 'carry the blame, and carry it alone, for the continuation of the slave trade'.

This article, focusing on Henry Dundas and the controversy surrounding abolition of the British slave trade, is located within these tensions between individual agency and broader forces. It also addresses the responsibility of historians to maintain the standards of the history discipline. It begins with a discussion of three key studies, moves to interrogate the 'evidence' that Dundas mobilised Scottish votes and influenced voting through his oratory, and outlines later events leading to the end of the trade.

Historiography

In the introduction to his *SHR* article, Mullen (2021a: 221) alleged that 'Historians [sic] of slavery and abolition' see 'Dundas's parliamentary activities as anti-abolitionist in nature'. Some scholars have certainly viewed Dundas in this light.[2] Online, however, Mullen (2021b, 2021c) asserted that 'There is no

historiographical controversy about Henry Dundas' culpability in delaying abolition', 'The activist position (that Henry Dundas delayed abolition) is not one based upon "rewriting history" but the arguments are broadly consistent with the published work of academic historians going back to 1975', and 'Historians of slavery and abolition who have substantiated their views in academic writing are unequivocal that Dundas delayed abolition. The plaque wording reflects that orthodoxy'. These allegations serve to hold Dundas solely accountable for the delay. A broader assessment of the works of some of these historians, however, casts very considerable doubt on Mullen's claims and that of the Edinburgh plaque.

In 1975, two key books on the British slave trade abolition appeared, both authors having consulted each other's manuscript drafts in advance of publication (Davis, 1975: 18; Anstey, 1975: xvii). David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* was the second book in his ambitious three-part trilogy which set out to examine antislavery activities in Britain and America. As a result of his scale and approach, Davis (1975: 115–7, 380, 433, 429) spread his arguments throughout the volume. He noted Dundas's role in securing an amendment in 1792 to bring about gradual rather than immediate abolition, but that the need for West Indian legislatures' co-operation meant there could be an indefinite delay. Despite this, immediate abolition was unlikely to have passed, even if Dundas had not proposed the word 'gradually', due to concerns about revolution in France and Saint-Domingue as well as the probability that abolition would mean the victory of France in the West Indies. For abolitionists, war and revolution were therefore key challenges. As Davis further recognised, even if abolitionists had been more numerous, there was little hope of ending the slave trade. Indeed, William Wilberforce later admitted that abolition had no chance of gaining approval in the House of Lords and that Dundas's gradual insertion had no effect on the voting outcome. In the following year, 1793, Wilberforce accepted the view of Lord Grenville that any attempt to influence the Lords would severely harm the abolition cause. Davis not only noted these points but maintained that abolition was anathema to the Lord High Chancellor and repugnant to the King, George III.

Davis (1975: 430) largely overlooked the events of 1796 (outlined below) though he offered an overall opinion for the 1790s: 'No figure was more influential in crystallizing opinion on such issues than Henry Dundas, who presided over colonial affairs as Pitt's Home Secretary' and who Dale Porter says controlled patronage at both ends of Empire and influenced the votes of 34 Scots MPs and 11 Scots peers. Davis's (1975: 432–3) additional argument against Dundas at this juncture included reference to a communication from West India interests thanking Dundas for his opposition to the bill. Yet Davis

(1975: 420, 102–3) added that abolition of the slave trade was hardly conceivable in the 1790s due to:

> … the antiabolitionist alliance [that] included 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, then, while acknowledging Dundas's influence in the Commons up to 1796, outlined many other factors that made British abolition of the slave trade impossible at that time. The eventual passage of the bill in 1807 was, he argued, due to 'experiments in political innovation as well as a redefinition of the role of national interest in colonial policy' (1975: 441).

Roger Anstey's *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810* identified political and economic arguments in the House of Commons against abolition. For Anstey (1975: 286, 314–5, 308), 'The most likely explanation of the defeats suffered by the abolitionists in the period up to 1796 is, surely, that the West Indian interest, conjoined with the African merchants, was able to muster superior parliamentary strength'. He then narrowed in on Dundas's actions, repeating Dale H. Porter's (and Davis's) reference to Dundas mobilising the Scottish vote, abolitionists blaming Dundas for the defeat in the Commons, and the Society of West India Planters and Merchants conveying gratitude to Dundas. Based on this evidence, Anstey (1975: 315; my emphasis) noted that 'abolitionists were right to acknowledge Dundas … as the most important cause of the failure of immediate abolition in the Commons in the period up to 1796'. Mullen's (2021a: 221) misleading citation of Anstey, however, elided the words 'in the Commons'. As such, Mullen failed to recognise that Anstey limited Dundas's influence to that body.

It is equally important to recognise that Anstey (1975: 315–18), having made these comments about Dundas, immediately qualified his remarks: 'To offer an explanation of the defeat of abolition in the Commons is not, of course, completely to explain the parliamentary failure of abolition'. He then charted reasons for opposition in the Lords including their arch-conservatism, 'an ingrained attitude … for traditional imperial interests', the influence of the French Revolution, and the less able presentation of the abolition case. Indeed, he contended that blocking in the Lords was the most serious obstacle to reform. Further, Anstey's (1975: 322, 410–3) coverage of later years concluded that the abolition cause still struggled as 'the political obstacles to a general abolition continued to be insuperable'. In his conclusion and reflections, he pointed to several factors preventing abolition but made no mention of

Dundas. The most critical obstacle, Anstey (1975: 407) argued, was the 'deep-rooted sense of the importance of the West Indies for British prosperity amongst the political nation'.

Prior to Davis and Anstey's publications, Dale H. Porter's *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England, 1784–1807* appeared. Mullen, however, situated Porter with historians taking a more positive or impartial view of Dundas. Porter set out to try and understand why a majority of British MPs were opposed to immediate abolition of the slave trade. In doing so, Porter (1970: x) argued that a focus on certain individuals blinds historians to wider political and economic factors. In his judgment, no single group of individuals or events determined the decisions of Parliament. For Porter (1970: 54–69, 89–90), politicians opposed the slave trade for many reasons, including concerns about threats to property and commerce, and the linkage made by some parliamentarians between abolitionism and revolution and rebellion in France and Saint-Domingue. He maintained that abolitionists 'tended to overlook the strength of the economic and political arguments against abolition, the skill of their opponents, and the mistakes of Wilberforce himself'. Reflecting on events that took place in 1792, Porter (1970: 80–83) acknowledged that Dundas was vulnerable to criticism, but that his support for gradual abolition was understandable since he had amended William Wilberforce's original motion in accordance with the wishes of the House of Commons. By advocating gradualism, Dundas was in effect avoiding inevitable defeat for the abolitionists. Perhaps most importantly in relation to 1792, Porter (1970: 141) has stated:

> Dundas's proposals of 1792 had envisaged a program of cooperation between the British government and the West Indian legislatures, leading to a complete but financially non-destructive abolition by 1800, seven years before the actual event. The slave trade to foreign colonies would have ended in 1793 instead of 1806 … Finally, a law based on Dundas's proposals need not have been any less effective than the abolition of 1807, because the cut-off date was not dependent upon the planters' cooperation. If slaveowners had not prepared for the end of the slave trade by 1800, that would have been their own misfortune.

As for the 1796 abolition bill, defeated at its third reading, Porter (1970: 96, 142–3) made two points that subsequent historians, including Mullen, have repeated. The first was that the votes Dundas controlled may have been decisive in the third reading of the bill leading to its defeat in the House of Commons. He also observed that Dundas received thanks from the Standing Committee of Planters and Merchants for his opposition to the abolition bill.

Yet in relation to the vote Porter highlighted other relevant factors including the carelessness of Wilberforce's supporters who began to 'relax' and failed to appear at the third reading of the bill. The trade's eventual abolition in 1807, he reasoned, was due to changing economic conditions and 'a strong, abolition-minded ministry'.

Close and careful scrutiny of the key works of Anstey, Davis, and Porter therefore call into question Mullen's (2021b, 2021c) claims that 'The activist position (that Henry Dundas delayed abolition) is not one based upon "rewriting history" but the arguments are broadly consistent with the published work of academic historians going back to 1975'; and, 'Historians of slavery and abolition who have substantiated their views in academic writing are unequivocal that Dundas delayed abolition. The plaque wording reflects that orthodoxy'. Those remarks are at best an oversimplification and, at worst, a considerable distortion of the historiography. There is, instead, much more nuance in their reflections on Dundas's role than Mullen allows. Unlike Mullen, who glossed over these many other factors relevant to abolition of the slave trade failing to pass in the 1790s, Davis, Anstey, and Porter all provided greater contextual discussion of factors beyond Dundas's role including the consequences of revolution in France and Saint-Domingue, threats to property and commerce, the importance of the West Indies to British prosperity, Wilberforce's errors and intransigence, and the influence of the Lords and King George III. In other words, while these previous historians acknowledged Dundas's influence in the House of Commons, they accepted the futility of the slave trade abolition bill passing sooner. Although they differed over the respective explanatory weight attached to these factors, there is no sense in their work that Dundas's actions alone prevented the passage of abolition.

Dundas's Oratorical Skills and the Scottish Vote

Central to Mullen's (2021a: 239–41) argument that Dundas delayed British abolition of the slave trade is the 'compelling evidence' that Dundas helped to ensure continuation of the slave trade when, in 1796 during the decisive third reading of Wilberforce's motion, the abolition bill was defeated in the House of Commons by 74 votes to 70 (compared with the bill passing the first reading 93 to 67 and 64 to 31 at the second reading). According to Mullen, 'Almost no MPs from Scotland deviated from the committed anti-abolitionist stance of the Scottish manager, Dundas'. Besides supposing that Dundas mobilised Scottish parliamentary votes, Mullen surmised that Dundas's 'persuasive oratory on the political and economic importance of the West Indies compelled others to vote

against the bill' including 'colonial MPs and undecideds'. He buttressed these claims of Dundas's pivotal role by repeating earlier historians' references to communications received from the Society of West India Planters and Merchants thanking Dundas for opposing the bill and condemnation from abolitionists blaming him for the outcome. Dundas did not vote.

But how far do these arguments stand up to scrutiny? After the parliamentary union of Scotland and England in 1707, Scottish representatives in the House of Commons at Westminster comprised 45 parliamentary seats (33 county constituencies and 15 burghs) (Furber, 1931: 176). When Dundas became the Scottish manager in 1783, after a hiatus in that role of around two decades, party divisions were relatively fluid. Opposition existed, however, from those opposed to Dundas's methods of political management and who were embittered by the way in which William Pitt the Younger came to power. Against this background, Dundas began to build alliances and loyalties through the deployment of patronage to cement the government's influence in Scotland. He succeeded especially after 1793 as the outbreak of war with France and fear of the rapid spread of domestic radicalism concentrated the minds of conservative-minded MPs. Following the 1796 election, 43 Scottish MPs could be considered government supporters, including Whigs and independents (Brown, 1998: 269, 271–273). Yet, at the time of the slave trade abolition vote earlier that year, just 12 Scottish MPs voted against abolition, one voted for it, and 31 Scottish parliamentarians did not cast a vote. Nowhere does Mullen (2021a: 240) mention this latter figure but claims instead that 'all twelve Scottish parliamentarians … were aligned with Dundas'.

What is indeed surprising in regard to the 1796 vote, and still requires explanation, is that some Scottish MPs who did not cast a vote against abolition had interests in the West Indies.[3] That they did not do so is all the more surprising when taking into account the role of the Scots in the trade and slave system more widely. Even though few ships involved in the slave trade sailed direct from Scottish ports, Scots were heavily involved as captains, crew and physicians on ships leaving Liverpool, the main slaving port in Britain (Schwarz, 2015: 148). When absentee slave owners received compensation, after emancipation of the enslaved in 1833, Scottish beneficiaries were over-represented across the British Isles (Draper, 2015: 174). Slavery was also a central factor in Scotland's economy. Slave societies provided markets for Scottish products including clothing and salted fish, and in turn sent products such as sugar and raw cotton back to Scotland. Indeed, Devine (2015a) has argued the effects of the slave economy were significantly more important to Scottish industrialisation than in England. The West Indies also offered

employment opportunities 'to satisfy personal ambition and access careers but also to buttress decaying family fortunes' (Devine, 2015b: 17).

Why, then, did Dundas fail to mobilise his MPs from Scotland? Distance from parliament may have been a factor while some may have been abroad at the time. That there was no sustained public defence of the slave trade in Scotland (Whyte, 2015: 193) may also have made some Scottish MPs wary of opposing immediate abolition. Further, some scholars, including Porter (1970: 95), have argued that between 1792 and 1800 most MPs were hostile or indifferent to abolition and neglected to turn up to vote, meaning success or failure depended on those present, but this hardly supports allegations of Dundas's control and influence in Scotland. Part of the answer lies in these votes on abolition being a free vote on a private bill in which 'every official man was at liberty to act as he saw fit' in accordance with 'principles and prejudices' rather than having to vote along party lines (Anstey, 1975: 300, 306). Seymour Drescher (1990: 569) has also recognised that 'cabinets were always so divided over the question that ministerial discipline could not be used either to force attendance or to control voting behaviour'.

The extreme volatility of the voting record for and against abolition over the period (Richardson, 2022: 226) likewise suggests that Dundas did not in any way have an overwhelming influence over the process and was not the arch controller of Scottish parliamentarians. How far Scottish MPs and others voted against abolition in previous years is unknown since that evidence does not appear in the historical record.

In his recent book on the British slave trade and its abolition, David Richardson (2022: 230–1, 223, 216) has observed that Dundas 'played a leading role in killing the abolition bill that passed the Commons in 1792' but 'he was not the only Tory minister in the period before the coalition to resist outlawing the slave trade.' Richardson identified a range of groups who, for various reasons, 'resisted calls in Parliament for abolition'. Among them were individuals with West India interests, King George III and his entourage, and 'some Tory and Whig faction leaders'. Key figures included Lord Edward Thurlow, Charles Jenkinson, Henry Addington, John Fane, and the Duke of Portland. Furthermore, West India representation in the Commons, though not united, was strong and since many resided near London they were more likely to attend and vote on matters compared with country MPs. For Richardson, a historian who has specialised in research on slavery throughout his long career, this collective hostility meant that abolition of the slave trade as a formal government policy was 'inconceivable before 1806–7'.

Indeed, throughout the years that motions to abolish the slave trade were put before the House of Commons and the House of Lords, numerous

individuals spoke in opposition, and for various reasons. It is worth citing some examples of the range of their arguments over time, as well as the language they used to convey their degree of opposition. In April 1791 (Cobbett, vol. 29: 281–358), Thomas Grosvenor admitted, 'it was not an amiable trade, but neither was the trade of a butcher an amiable trade, and yet a mutton chop was, nevertheless, a very good thing'. Rowland Burdon 'wished to give time to the planters' since he feared 'the immediate abolition might cause a monopoly among the rich planters, to the prejudice of the less affluent'. Sir William Young declared that other nations would rush to engage in the traffic open to them from Britain's withdrawal and there would be 'distress and ruin in the colonies … of insurrection and of revolt'. Alderman Watson thought 'natives of Africa were taken from a worse state of slavery in their own country, to one more mild'. He added that abolition of the trade would ruin the West Indies, destroy the Newfoundland fisheries, cut off seamen and 'annihilate our marine'. Mr Drake, who contributed towards the end of discussions in 1791, contended, 'The property of the West Indians was at stake; and though men might be generous of their own property, they should not be so with the property of others.' Wilberforce's vote for immediate abolition lost 88 to 163. These speeches set the grounds for further objections that would be repeated, developed, and extended in the years ahead.

The following year, in early April, attitudes towards the trade had begun to shift in part as a result of public petitions against shipment of the enslaved. At the same time, however, there was heightened anxiety that the slave revolution in Saint-Domingue would spread. The revolt would, in a few years, James Walvin (1986: 114–15) pointed out, 'herald communal racial violence, full-scale war … and the collapse of the prospering economy of the island'. It was in this 'highly charged atmosphere' that Dundas proposed the word 'gradual' as 'a moderate and middle way of proceeding' (Jennings, 1997: 72). Among those speaking in parliament (Cobbett, vol. 29: 1075–1292) was Charles Jenkinson who told of other nations carrying on the trade 'at a much greater disadvantage to the Africans' and of 'the calamities of St. Domingo'. He agreed with abolition but 'was anxious to do that gradually' rather than 'rashly'. Lord Carhampton referred to the 'massacre and disasters in St. Domingo', alleging that 'negroes wanted but three things, which were, to murder their masters, ravish their women, and drink all their rum'. This, for Carhampton, meant 'murder would be sanctioned by parliamentary authority.' He added to his lengthy address that justice was due to planters and merchants, that the trade 'had been sanctioned by parliament', and that just 'some few wicked men had committed abuses in the conduct of the trade'. Mr Grant also wished to give 'planters due time to prepare for abolition' reckoning that 'too sudden and too precipitate an

endeavour at abolition' would give 'greater misery to the slaves'. Alderman Watson deemed 'immediate abolition to be an impracticable measure' as it would cause 'the greatest detriment to the commerce of the country' and, if 'too speedily abolished, the capital of the merchants of Great Britain would go into the hands of foreign countries'.

By the end of 1792, mobs roamed Britain burning effigies of Thomas Paine fearing he was plotting a revolution in England from France; in January the following year King Louis XVI of France was executed. On 1 February 1793, France declared war on Britain. Within this context, opposition continued against immediate abolition of the slave trade albeit with lower levels of voting that would now define the next decade (Richardson, 2022: 227). The Lords debated the issue in April (Cobbett, vol. 30: 654–9) with the Earl of Abingdon mentioning the war with France and events in Saint-Domingue where 'rivers of commerce dried up, whilst fountains of human blood are made to issue in their stead'. The King's son, the Duke of Clarence, also voiced the 'merits of the trade' including 'the immense capital'.

In February 1794 (Cobbett, vol. 30: 1440–44), debate on ending the trade to foreign colonies took place in the context of war. Colonel John Fenton Cawthorne opposed abolition 'on patriotic principles and for the sake of individual security'. Alderman Newnham spoke of the 'ruin of individuals and the diminution of the supplies of the state' and claimed slaves in the West Indies were happier than in Africa. Banastre Tarleton considered abolition of the trade an 'unequivocal attack upon private property'. According to Edward Hyde East, 'when war raged abroad, and distrust and jealousy prevailed at home, it would be manifestly wrong to risk any additional evil.' Robert Peel, meanwhile, claimed that:

> … the natives of Africa were not yet sufficiently matured by civilization to receive their liberty and freedom; and that emancipating those who were not sufficiently enlightened to understand and feel the blessings of liberty, would be like putting a sword into the hands of a madman.

The bill passed in the Commons and was sent to the Lords where, in May that year, Lord Abingdon (Cobbett, vol. 31: 467–70) predicted 'insubordination, anarchy, confusion, murder, havock, devastation, and ruin' should abolition of the trade occur. He objected to private property and the profit of the trade being violated 'by a few silly words in a silly act of parliament'. He further took umbrage that the Commons was dictating to the Lords. Lord Grenville desired abolition but not before completion of the Lords' inquiry. The Lords passed an amendment to postpone.

In February 1795 (Cobbett, vol. 31: 1328–1345), Joseph Foster Barham expected the 'complete ruin' of West India planters with the French 'instigating the slaves to rebellion'. East advocated that the issue should 'be deferred until the danger was over'. Several politicians hailed the actions of the House of Lords in giving little attention to abolition with Alderman Newnham praising them for 'curbing the pernicious effects of a mischievous zeal' which would be 'destructive of the commerce and revenue of the country'. Sir William Young recalled his time in the West Indies where slaves 'were in general in a better situation than the lower class of labourers in other countries'.

Such opposition continued in February 1796 (Cobbett, vol. 32: 741–901). General Tarleton specified that 'no time could be more unfit for coming to a resolution of abolition than the present'. Jenkinson highlighted the 'present convulsed state of the islands, arising from the war' and wished 'the subject to be buried in oblivion' until peace came. As debate continued into March, Sir William Young continued to speak of the ruin of West India merchants and planters as well as the suffering of Britain, a claim echoed by General Smith who feared the 'utter ruin of England'. General Tarleton calculated that abolition would aggravate the distress of many classes, including mechanics, merchants, and seamen, affected by the war. Dent said abolition 'would encourage disaffection and rebellion' while Barham reckoned 'such a measure, would hazard the security, peace, and prosperity of the colonies; and probably excite revolt and rebellion'. Before the final vote, Dent deemed the bill 'a disgrace' while Sir William Young pointed to 'tyranny and oppression' with planters 'consigned to inevitable ruin'. So too did he point to the interests of Britain being 'injured' and that slaves on the coast of Africa 'would be put to immediate death'. General Smith buttressed these comments and indicated that slaves had helped defend 'their masters and their property against the French'. George Rose indicated the bill would not prevent the rise of Cork and Waterford 'on the ruins of Bristol and Liverpool'. Judith Jennings (1997: 89) also noted the contribution of William Windham, the Secretary at War, to the debates: 'Windham believed abolition in any form must wait for peace. Faced with such opposition, Wilberforce's motion was lost by 70 votes to 74' on its third reading. Mullen (2021a: 239), however, overlooked these other speeches and simply stated in relation to Dundas: 'With such persuasive arguments from the now secretary of state for war, support in the lower house was perhaps less than expected.'

In May 1797, Charles Rose Ellis contended that the 'negroes in the West Indies did not desire the abolition' while Bryan Edwards pointed to 'many widows and orphans had their last stake in West India property' and warned that abolition of the trade would cause negroes 'to rise in insurrection'

(Cobbett, vol. 33: 571, 574). Sir William Young also cautioned that the bill would enact 'a revolution in the West Indies' (Cobbett, vol. 33: 575).

Whatever the merits and realities of the political and social landscape when abolition was debated, these are but a few examples of the many forceful arguments that politicians made in Parliament to oppose immediate abolition of the slave trade. Although parliament had committed in 1792 to end the trade gradually, politicians made their decisions for or against various abolition measures within the backdrop of national and international alarm, crises and threats. Indeed, the 1790s continued to be a turbulent decade including the outbreak in 1798 of serious rebellion in Ireland. These speeches also show that Henry Dundas was not alone in countering William Wilberforce's desires for immediate abolition and the praise accorded Dundas from those with West Indian interests outside of Parliament hardly constitutes proof that he alone swayed voting patterns. The evidence is therefore overwhelming that one man's arguments and oratorical skills cannot be said to have decisively influenced voting patterns.

Indeed, in her study of proslavery and anti-abolition sentiment in Britain, Paula E. Dumas has shown that parliamentarians who opposed abolition of the slave trade attacked the motives, evidence and character of abolitionists (Dumas, 2016: 117). Categorising their arguments along the following lines – economic; strategic and naval importance; historical; legal; paternalist; moral and religious; and racial – Dumas has deduced that their claims 'extolled the benefits of the slave trade for Great Britain, her colonies, and her people' (Dumas, 2016: ch 1). Richardson (2022: 224, 228–9) similarly summarised these parliamentary contributions against abolition as encompassing fears of the ruin of planters, the advantage to rival slave trading nations, the supposed benefit of the trade to Africans, and that slavery was not inconsistent with Christianity. Indeed, two-thirds of parliamentary arguments put forward national economic and security issues, reflecting a British society grappling with 'radical change at home and abroad' and the dread of mass risings, radical reform, and social disorder as a result of the impact of the French Revolution and slave uprisings. As Richardson (2022: 228) acutely put it: 'In sum, 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.'

With these findings, Richardson has endorsed and extended the conclusions of other longstanding historians of slavery and the slave trade. James Walvin (1986: 114–120), for instance, concluded that from 1792 a wide range of factors led to parliamentary alienation from the abolitionist cause including opposition

to any type of parliamentary reform due to alarm it would lead to upheavals as in France, the violence of events in France, trepidation about domestic security, the conquest of new land in the Caribbean, and, above all else, the repercussions of the Saint-Domingue uprising which 'inspired a fear of the uncontrollable contagion of black revolt'. These circumstances led to 'a generalised dismissal of all forms of reform, whether parliamentary change or abolition of the slave trade'. Seymour Drescher (2009: 274) similarly noted that 'Years of internal radical agitation and an even longer external threat to Britain had led to the suppression of all reform legislation', including abolition. For John Coffey (2012: 867–9), 'The crisis of the 1790s meant that abolitionist preaching was conducted in more anguished tones … Abolitionists were also dismayed by the decline of popular enthusiasm for the cause'. Davis (1975: 117) has also stated, 'Even if the abolitionists had been more numerous … there was little hope of ending the slave trade unless philanthropy could be buttressed by other forces'.

Developments in the 1800s

A further weakness in Mullen's study is the complete failure to discuss critical developments in the 1800s which led to the passing of the slave trade abolition bill in 1807. His (2021a: 243, 246) brief comments on this period suggest that devolution of 'reform of slavery to enslavers was the most insidiously effective way of delaying abolition up to 1804' on the grounds that colonial legislatures would never accept such a decision. Mullen also mentioned Dundas's impeachment in April 1805 followed by the slave trade abolition bill gaining royal assent in March 1807. The inference is that the two were causally linked. But scholars have long debated the reasons for Britain's eventual termination of the slave trade, encompassing humanitarian, economic, religious and philosophical ideas.

According to Davis (1975: 440–1, 117), following Pitt's resignation as Prime Minister in 1801 and the strengthening of the slave-trading interest, the opposition leader Charles James Fox reckoned there would be little hope of abolishing the slave trade during the reign of George III. Nevertheless, with French competition in the Caribbean at an end due to France's failure to subdue Saint-Domingue, it seemed the abolitionist cause might encounter less resistance. Indeed, in 1804, the Commons approved Wilberforce's abolition measure, but it was placed on hold in the Lords. The following year, 1805, Wilberforce resurrected the motion only for it to be defeated. This time, as Anstey (1975: 345–6) indicated, Irish MPs had turned against the bill while

some abolitionists, thinking victory of the cause was now certain, were not present but attending to other matters. As Davis (1975: 441) pointed out, 'Success would require experiments in political innovation as well as a redefinition of the role of national interest in colonial policy.' Through government sponsored measures, the final drive for abolition became 'a policy-driven political act rather than a moral one' with arguments 'focused overwhelmingly on the national interest or the inexpediency of British slaving activities, not their immorality' (Richardson, 2022: 244).

One such tactic was Wilberforce's withdrawal from the debates with others assuming responsibility for taking charge of the relevant measures. The first achievement was the passage in 1806 of the Foreign Slave Trade Bill which prevented British ships from supplying slaves to foreign colonies. Then, in early 1807, a motion to end the slave trade was introduced first in the Lords and then in the Commons so as to circumvent royal influence. The Slave Trade Abolition Act was passed by a vote of 100 to 36 in the Lords and 283 to 16 in the Commons, outlawing from 1 May 1807 Britain's long central involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.

Porter (1970: 142) suggested that 'Wilberforce's withdrawal from leadership in the parliamentary debates of 1806 and 1807 smoothed the final path to success'. That abolition was a key issue during the 1806 general election and MPs had to convey to their constituents their support or opposition to abolition may also have prompted many members to promise to back abolition to ensure they were returned to parliament (Walvin, 2007: 18). The cause of abolition also benefited from the revolution in Saint-Domingue and its independence from France in 1804 as the new state of Haiti. But, in addition, public confidence arising from Nelson's success at Trafalgar, the United States outlawing foreign slave carrying by its ships, abolitionists' alliances, and their use of political skills in 1806–7 helped determine the outcome of abolition (Richardson, 2022: 245–6).

Conclusion

The late Australian historian Stuart Macintyre advocated that historians:

> … have a duty to judge accounts of the past according to the standards of the discipline – and to criticise those that do not deal faithfully with the primary sources, misrepresent secondary works, overlook important bodies of work, misunderstand context or violate principles of historical interpretation. (see Holbrook, 2021)

It is also a truism that historians have the right to interpret facts differently but not to knowingly misrepresent them (Hare, 2006: xiv). Such high standards are especially crucial when the past is so often invoked – but often distorted, manufactured, or misrepresented – to justify the politics of the present.

This article has argued that allegations that Henry Dundas was solely responsible for the enslavement of more than half a million Africans, as asserted on the Dundas plaque in Edinburgh, or that abolition would have been achieved sooner than 1807 without his opposition, are fundamentally mistaken. Despite Mullen's claims that Dundas worked with West India interests to stave off abolition as long as possible by devolving responsibility of reform to the West Indies legislatures, 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. Leadership can be significantly constrained by wider-socio political forces (Richardson, 2022: 19). Indeed, Mullen's approach harks back to an older historiographical tradition that blames or lauds a particular individual for momentous societal advances. We see this, for instance, in the praise William Wilberforce has received for solely achieving abolitionism, despite much evidence to the contrary (Spiers, 1985: 47–68).

Many explanations therefore exist for the accomplishment of abolition. But, equally, examination of the views of historians going back around half a century clearly demonstrates that they identified many domestic and international factors for the failure to achieve abolition before 1807 including: defence and security anxieties at a time of international war and slave uprising; opposition to any domestic 'progressive' reform for fear of giving comfort and encouragement to the menacing forces of contemporary political radicalism; the critical dependence of the UK Treasury for war revenues from the lucrative Caribbean trades; the intransigence of Wilberforce and his overall poor parliamentary management; the occasional complacency of abolitionists; the influence of the West India interest in the parliamentary debates on abolition; effective stalling tactics in the House of Lords; and the unrelenting opposition of King George III, his political coterie and some ministers of the Crown to abolition itself. But these are the very elements ignored or marginalised by Stephen Mullen in his extraordinarily myopic focus on the sole impact of Henry Dundas. Guy Rowlands (2021) has also identified Mullen's 'lack of contextualisation', and ignoring Dundas's life 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'. Sir Tom Devine's articles in the press last year arguing that broader 'forces' were much more important than

the role of one individual politician were criticised in public and on social media by some activists. However, the research and conclusions presented here fully support his interpretations.

The current text on the plaque beside the statue of Henry Dundas is therefore patently absurd, erroneous, and 'bad history'. Edinburgh City Council have the urgent moral duty to remove it. Otherwise, the city faces the grave charge and international opprobrium of falsifying history on a public monument.

Appendix: Revised Wording of the Melville Monument Plaque

At the top of this neoclassical column stands a statue of Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742–1811). He was the Scottish Lord Advocate, an MP for Edinburgh and Midlothian, and the First Lord of the Admiralty. Dundas was a contentious figure, provoking controversies that resonate to this day. While Home Secretary in 1792, and first Secretary of State for War in 1796 he was instrumental in deferring the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Slave trading by British ships was not abolished until 1807. As a result of this delay, more than half a million enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic. Dundas also curbed democratic dissent in Scotland, and both defended and expanded the British empire, imposing colonial rule on indigenous peoples. He was impeached in the United Kingdom for misappropriation of public money, and, although acquitted, he never held public office again. Despite this, the monument before you was funded by voluntary contributions from British naval officers, petty officers, seamen, and marines and was erected in 1821, with the statue placed on top in 1827.

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.

Notes

1. https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/directory-record/1110080/a-plaque-for-the-melville-monument
2. Mullen's assessment of the historiography includes literary scholars. With some of his examples, however, he takes the quote out of context and/or cites quotes that appear in works with barely any mention of Dundas. Mullen also neglects to engage with histories of abolition that fail to mention Dundas at all.
3. Among those I have identified who had interest in the West Indies but did not vote in 1796 are: Alexander Allardyce, John Campbell, David McDowall Grant, Sir John Sinclair, Archibald Edmondstone, William McDowall, Hew Hamilton Dalrymple, John

Hope, Francis Humberston Mackenzie, Sir George Douglas, and Andrew James Cochrane.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor David Richardson (University of Hull) for his feedback on this article, the journal's two referees for their robust endorsement, and Alexander Ritchie, Subject Librarian – Special Collections at the University of Otago, for facilitating access to the British parliamentary material.

References

Anstey, R. (1975). *The Atlantic Slave Trade and British Abolition, 1760–1810*. London: Macmillan Press.

Brown, D. J. (1998). The government of Scotland under Henry Dundas and William Pitt. *History,* vol. 83, no. 270, 265–279.

Cobbett, W. (ed.). (1817). *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. XXIX (22 March 1791–13 December 1792). London: T.C. Hansard.

Cobbett, W. (ed.). (1817). *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. XXX (13 December 1792–10 March 1794). London: T.C. Hansard.

Cobbett, W. (ed.). (1818). *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. XXXI (14 March 1794–22 May 1795). London: T.C. Hansard.

Cobbett, W. (ed.). (1818). *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. XXXII (27 May 1795–2 March 1797). London: T.C. Hansard.

Cobbett, W. (ed.). (1818). *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803*, vol. XXXIII (3 March 1797–30 November 1798). London: T.C. Hansard.

Coffey, John. (2012). 'Tremble, Britannia!': Fear, Providence and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807. *The English Historical Review,* vol. 127, no. 527, 844–81.

Davis, D. B. (1975). *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Devine, T. M. (2015a). Did slavery make Scotia great? A question revisited. In T. M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 225–45.

Devine, T. M. (2015b). Lost to history. In T.M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 21–40.

Devine, T. M. (2020). TV show's 'miserable failure': Historian condemns BBC slavery documentary. *The Herald*, 25 October 2020, 22–23.

Draper. N. (2015). Scotland and colonial slave ownership: The evidence of the Slave Compensation Records. In T.M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's*

Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 166–186.

Drescher, S. (1990). People and parliament. The rhetoric of the British slave trade. *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 20, no. 4, 561–80.

Drescher, S. (2009). Divergent paths: The Anglo-American abolitions of the Atlantic slave trade. In P. Emmer (ed.), *Migration, Trade, and Slavery in an Expanding World: Essays in Honour of Pieter Emmer*. Leiden: Brill. 259–88.

Dumas, P. E. (2016). *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

Fry, M. (2020). Here's the real truth on Henry Dundas and whether he 'prolonged' slavery. *The National*, 16 June 2020, 12–13.

Furber, H. (1931). *Henry Dundas: First Viscount Melville 1742–1811 Political manager of Scotland statesman, administrator of British India*. London: Oxford University Press.

Hare, D. (2016). Foreword. In Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Denial: Holocaust History on Trial*. New York: HarperCollins; first published 2006.

Hay, K. (2020). Edinburgh professor renews call to reword history on a statue memorialising man who prolonged the slave trade. *Edinburgh Evening News*, 6 June 2020.

Holbrook, C. (2021). Q and A with Stuart Macintyre. *Australian Policy and History*, 1 December 2021, https://aph.org.au/2021/12/q-and-a-with-stuart-macintyre. [Accessed 25 November 2021].

Jennings, J. (1997). *The Business of Abolishing the British Slave Trade, 1783–1807*. London: Frank Cass.

Kershaw, I. (2004). Personality and power: The individual's role in the history of twentieth-century Europe. *Historian*, vol. 83, 8–19.

Leask, David. (2021). Toronto set to erase Dundas over his slave trade legacy. *The Times*, 7 June 2021.

Mackay, N. (2021). The big read: Historic debate: Academics go head-to-head over Scotland's ugly legacy of slavery. *The Herald*, 31 January 2021, 34–35, 64.

Mullen, S. (2021a). Henry Dundas: A 'great delayer' of abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. *Scottish Historical Review*, vol. C, 2, no. 253, 218–248.

Mullen, S. (2021b). Clarifying Henry Dundas' role as the 'great delayer' of the abolition of the slave trade. Parts 1–3, Edinburgh University Press blog, 10 November 2021, https://euppublishingblog.com/2021/11/10/clarifying-henry-dundas-role-as-the-great-delayer-of-the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-part-1-historiographical-orthodoxy-public-debate-and-memorialisation/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=clarifying-henry-dundas-role-as-the-great-delayer-of-the-abolition-of-the-slave-trade-part-1-historiographical-orthodoxy-public-debate-and-memorialisation. [Accessed 28 November 2021].

Mullen, S. (2021c). @glasgow_sugar, on Twitter, 8 March 2021.

Porter, D. H. (1970). *The Abolition of the Slave Trade in England, 1784–1807*. Hamden: Archon Books.

Richardson, D. (2022). *Principles and Agents: The British Slave Trade and its Abolition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Rowlands, G. (2021). Injustice & the casting of blame in history: The Melville monument and Edinburgh's confrontation with its imperial past. *History Reclaimed*. https://historyreclaimed.co.uk/injustice-the-casting-of-blame-in-history-the-melville-monument-and-edinburghs-confrontation-with-its-imperial-past/. [Accessed 6 January 2022].

Saul, J. R. (2021). Dundas Street is a terrible name: Changing it would show Toronto is no longer trapped in the image of a major slave baron. *The Star*, 6 July 2021.

Schwarz, Suzanne. (2015). Scottish surgeons in the Liverpool slave trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In T. M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 145–165.

Spiers, F. (1985). William Wilberforce: 150 years on. In Jack Hayward (ed.), *Out of Slavery: Abolition and After*. London: Frank Cass. 47–68.

Walvin, J. (1986). *England, Slaves and Freedom, 1776–1838*. Houndmills: Macmillan Press.

Walvin, J. (2007). The slave trade and British abolition, 1787–1807. *Historian*. 12–18.

Whyte, I. (2015). 'The Upas Tree, beneath whose pestiferous shade all intellect languishes and all virtue dies': Scottish public perceptions of the slave trade and slavery, 1756–1833. In T. M. Devine (ed.), *Recovering Scotland's Slavery Past: The Caribbean Connection*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 187–205.