Slavery - The Emancipation Movement in Britain

Transcript

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It is hard to be unaware of the fact that this month is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade, and that is the centre point of everything I am going to talk about.

200 years ago, on the 25th of March, the Commons voted eventually, after the best part of 30 years, that the slave trade should be ended, they rose as a man (although about 16 voted against it) to give a standing ovation to the one person sitting in the corner very quietly who they thought had been responsible for this. That man was William Wilberforce, a shy man and an extraordinary figure. He sat there quietly with his head bowed whilst the Commons gave him a standing ovation. The Commons do not normally give standing ovations; they wave the order papers and they make those funny noises, but they do not give you a standing ovation. That was one of the very rare occasions when it happened. The other time of course, in our own recent memory, was when the Commons did it for Robin Cook, when he resigned just before the war started. It is that unusual.

If you had have asked me a year ago to predict the kind of events that would take place this year, I would have fallen far short of what is happening. We have got new stamps to celebrate abolition; we have a new two pound coin to celebrate abolition; there is scarcely a museum and gallery in this country that is not laying on something to celebrate the abolition of the slave trade; the Government has thrown parties; the National Lottery have actually flung £20 million at various organisations to promote the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade. This is a very major event by any standards, but it has taken large numbers of people by surprise. In fact only yesterday, in the Independent travel section, the ten or twenty best things to do in Britain this year, it listed a number of these commemoration activities in the tourist section - who would have thought that that would take place? Those who have been working on this for years, would never have imagined that what seemed 40 years ago to be an arcane area of history would actually be absolute centre stage as a kind of social, cultural and political event, and that is something that I want to ask ourselves about. Why should that be the case? What is so special about abolition? Also for a country that had committed so much of its resources and accumulated such material wellbeing from the Atlantic slave trade, why was it that this same country turned against it, and after 1807, promptly became the world's great abolitionist power? It is an extraordinary about face: the aggressors, as it were, of the 18th Century in the Atlantic, the British, become the 19th Century gatekeepers in the Atlantic, the British. There is not a Department (apart from Sport) in the BBC that is not doing something to commemorate 1807, including Comedy. Now, there are not many laughs in this story, but Lenny Henry is doing something for the Comedy Department to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade.

Of course, you could say the British just like commemorating things: the Queen's 80th; D-Day; Trafalgar; a few years' ago, Gunpowder Plot. There are lots of things that we like to celebrate, but they tend to be things that give you that feel-good feeling, and it could be that that is what lies behind this extraordinary wave between 1807 in 2007. It could be that it is a sense of national wellbeing, but the question is, what is so special about it? When you begin to ask questions about 1807 - what happened?; what the consequences were?; what happened before? - it begins to look a little less easy to deal with. A large number of institutions I know that I've been dealing with this last couple of years in the build-up to 2007, do not quite get it when you say to them, 'Actually, this is a much more problematic story than it appears at first sight'. Once they begin to listen to people talk about 1807 in 2007, it finally becomes clear that here is a subject that is troublesome in ways that you wouldn't imagine.

Let me begin with a hymn which almost every single person in this room will know, and large numbers of people in this room would be able to sing it word for word. You will know immediately the significance of it. It is of course 'Amazing Grace':

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound;    That saved a wretch like me;    I once was lost, but now am found;    Was blind, but now can see.

That was written by John Newton in the winter of 1772 and first performed on New Year's Day 1773 in Olney, Buckinghamshire.
By then, John Newton was a famous cleric and a major figure on the clerical landscape in this country. Shortly after that, he moved to St Mary's in the City very close to here. But let me read something else that John Newton wrote, exactly 20 years earlier, in his journal off the coast of West Africa:

‘By the favour of divine providence, made a timely discovery today that the slaves were forming a plot for an insurrection. Surprised two of them attempting to get off their irons. Put the boys in irons and slightly in the thumb screws to urge them to a full confession.’

That is the same John Newton, exactly 20 years before. He was a slave captain onboard the African, offshore West Africa, trawling the African coast for African humanity to build up his human cargo before he turned west into the trade winds and the currents that would get him to Antigua and St Kitts so he could sell the Africans into the plantations of the Americas.

There are some things that the British like to remember and celebrate, but there are some things that they like to forget, and when we're looking back on 1807 I think it is worth reminding ourselves of the extraordinary areas that the British have tended to forget in this story about the slave trade and slavery. John Newton is one of them. He was a man of two different worlds: as a young man, he was an active slave captain, feeling no qualms whatsoever about trading for humanity off the coast of Africa and selling young Africans to the planters in St Kitts and Antigua etc., but by the end of his life in the 1780s he had changed completely. He realised that this was a personal sin and that he was actually likely to miss out on grace, hence the first line 'Amazing grace'. He was convinced that he could attain grace, and he was convinced of that by talking with another slave captain, Alexander Clooney, when they had both finished an Atlantic crossing and were both sat in the evenings on the deck of their respective slave ships at Sandy Point, St Kitts. They had theological discussions over a period of five or six days, talking about the concept of grace. This is a pretty incongruous state of affairs: here you have two Britons talking about theology on the decks of a slave ship, with the stink of the slave decks coming up from below; discussing this theology as if it is divorced from time and place; as if it is divorced from the kind of human reality that they had just been involved in.

This is one of the great difficulties of historians working on slavery, the slave trade and the campaign against it; that here is something that seems so beyond our ken, so beyond our understanding that it is hard to get inside the minds of the people involved in it. It is a world of such extraordinary brutality and such violence, and the more violent and brutal the more we know about it.

The curiosity here is that you have got godly men, devout Christians, going about what we regard as a godless activity, and yet, that is the essence of the slave trade. The odd thing about this is that by the end of the 18th Century, it all changes, and that the British come to think of the slave trade and slavery as a moral outrage and an unchristian way of conducting business. But if the slave trade is unchristian, unethical and wrong in 1807, was it not wrong and unchristian in 1707? What had changed? The slave trade had not changed. The slave trade was booming. The slave trade was actually doing better business than ever before by the 1780s and 1790s. At the very point that the British turned against it, the British were making more money from it than ever before. This is the really curious problem; the real historical conundrum. If it were not making money anymore and declining - if the people involved in it said, 'Well, it would be a good idea to get rid of it on economic grounds', then you could understand it, but that simply is not the case. The older arguments that have been swirling around the topic for about 60 years really do not stack up anymore because the slave trade was continuing to provide good material wellbeing and bounty to the British on a scale that they had not known before, and yet at that very moment they turned against it. This is a very peculiar historical phenomenon to persuade, particularly modern students, both left and right, on both sides of the Atlantic, that this is the case. People believe that there is more to political change than simple adorning of moral outrage about the slave trade. But there is an extraordinary shift in this country that takes place from about 1750 onwards. There is a shift of the deep tectonic plates, if you will, that have produced quite extraordinary major changes above; little changes below that produce great changes on top. The British people turned against the slaves for reasons I will explain and decide to do away with the trade from which they benefited.

What I want to do first of all though is just to talk about the slave trade itself, because the numbers are absolutely vital in any kind of discussion about this. The problem is that if you talk simply about the slave trade merely as numbers, you are exposing yourself to quite extraordinary criticism. If, for instance, I am dealing with the Holocaust and stood here and offered you an argument that it was merely about numbers, that it was 4.5 million not six million, people would scratch their heads and think there is something very strange about this.

There has been a group of historians who in fact have analysed the slave trade in statistical and numerical terms, and have stood back from dealing with its extraordinary emotional and moral resonances. Though that seems odd, it is absolutely vital to
get the numbers right, otherwise we cannot know the extent, so I offer you these kind of statistical snapshots just by way of saying this is the core of the story around which we have got to reconstruct a different kind of narrative. We now know, and it is pretty clear that something like 12 million Africans were loaded on board the slave ships over the whole period of the history of the Atlantic slave trade, between Columbus and the 1860s. There is general academic agreement on that. Around 10.5 million survived to landfall in the Americas, so there is a large number that do not make it, but the point to be made there of course is that the very great majority actually do make it to landfall in the Americas. The very great majority of those who do survive are deeply traumatised and large numbers of them are very sick, which has consequences to what happens to the slave populations in the Americas. So, overall, 12 million loaded onto the ships and about 10.5 million make landfall.

We know details of about 34,000 or 35,000 Atlantic slave voyages though there may have been about 40,000. About 12,000 of those were British, and of those, the largest single group came from Liverpool. Next year, 2008, the European City of Culture is Liverpool. How are we going to build in to that commemoration of Liverpool as a City of Culture the fact that it rose to its extraordinary prominence through the course of the 18th Century on the back of the Atlantic slave trade because it shipped tens of thousands of Africans into the Americas?

Another statistic is that from about 1690 through to about 1807, which are the peak years for the Atlantic slave trade, something like six million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic. About 3.5 million were shipped by the British, and a fifth of that number were in Liverpool ships, as the one of John Newton’s was.

You can cut these statistics and figures in any number of ways, but if you look at the period between Columbus and the 1820s, we know that something like 11 million people crossed the Atlantic to settle in the Americas, but of those 11 million people who sailed across the Atlantic to settle in the Americas, of those, only 2.5 million were Europeans. The rest, 8.5 million or so, were Africans. So until the 1820s, in numerical terms, the real pioneer of critical areas of the Americas was the African, not the European. They are very surprising numbers to a large number of people. We also know that of all the Africans shipped into the Americas, something like 70% of them were destined for the sugar fields, because, if there was any one economy that drives this system forward, it is sugar. What could be more British than a sweet cup of tea? But the sugar comes from Barbados and Jamaica, and it is mixed with tea from China to produce what we think of as a national drink, but it is a national drink simply because of the freaks of empire and commercial trade. The British loved the sweetenings of their food and drink by about 1750, and what makes that possible are the Africans in the Caribbean. If you went into a coffee shop anywhere round here in the mid-18th Century, you would not be able to see across the room because of the swirls of tobacco smoke. Where did that tobacco come from? It came from Virginia and from Maryland. Who grew it? It was the Africans and the offspring of Africans in the Chesapeake. These two commodities - tobacco and sugar - make aspects of British domestic and economic life possible which we just simply take for granted.

What I would like you to think about is not merely these kind of statistics, because what you are looking at there are three continents - Europe, Africa, and the Americas - linked together by a slave system that links the economies of those three continents in a very intimate and important fashion. You can see this in any number of ways. If you wander round the urban heartlands of this country - the urban artefacts that survive from the late-18th into the 19th Century - there you will see signs of memorials to slavery: the Bank of England, the banking system, the Gallery of Modern Art in Glasgow (which was the domestic home of the great tobacco baron who made his millions from the tobacco plantations of the Chesapeake), any number of buildings in Bristol and Liverpool that were directly related to the slave trade, or Manchester whose textiles went on to the slave ships and were exchanged for Africans in West Africa. Also Birmingham, one of the most inland places of all, where Matthew Bolton's papers in the Soho Museum show that the Birmingham iron industry rose on the back of the Atlantic slave trade. The metal goods that made possible the slave empires of the Americas, not merely the fetters, the chains, the collars, but every single axe, hoe, bill and hook that the salvages used in the slave fields of the Caribbean and the Chesapeake were manufactured in the Midlands. By the 1780s, 1790s, early prototype steam engines are being shipped by Matthew Bolton to the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. The slave quarters of the Caribbean actually dictate economic development in this country to an extraordinary degree. You cannot disentangle it from other factors, but nonetheless, the difficulty of trying to see the economic importance of slavery is that it is 5,000 miles away. It appears on the coast of West Africa, it appears to be in the Caribbean or the Americas, but actually, it was at the domestic heart of what was British life throughout the 17th and 18th Century, and all of this was made possible by Africans.

Again, this brings us back to this extraordinary conundrum, because this trade in Africans, and the material wellbeing that flowed back to this country - from the sugar plantations and the tobacco plantations and all the ancillary industries - all of that trade was booming as never before at the very moment the British turn against it. So what you are looking at is a change of political and
intellectual climate that actually relates directly to the economic transformation of this country. It would be easy, as I said right at the beginning, if the system was in economic decline. The evidence now is that it was not: the slave trade is better off than ever before.

There are a number of key elements that go to explain why it was that the British turned against the slave trade. It is easy to think of this in personal terms, and if you wander round Westminster Abbey, you can see the people we memorialise from the abolition of slavery were the men who led the political campaign in this country, particularly Wilberforce. Wilberforce has come to almost personify the whole campaign against the slave trade. If you asked anyone what they might know about abolition and ending of slavery, it would be William Wilberforce. Clearly he was a critical figure and he plays a critical role. It was not for nothing that his fellow MPs gave him a standing ovation. It is important that historians listen to what contemporaries say, and what was said of Wilberforce was that he was a critical figure. Without him it would not have happened the way it did when it did, but of course he was just one man amongst an army of thousands. The key determinants in switching opinion were areas of British life that do not sound very fruitful areas to investigate for such a major change as ending the slave trade.

Time for the Quakers, the topic I lectured on when I was here last. The Quakers are a critical group, more influential, out of all proportion to their numbers. They were influential on both sides of the Atlantic, in Philadelphia and in London, and from the late-17th Century, Quakers did not like slavery or the slave trade, and took a fundamental objection to it, but of course they faced serious problems. They are booming entrepreneurs and financiers and industrialists, and in the world of the 18th Century, how can you do good business without tripping over slavery? Two-thirds of the metal industry was in the hands of Quakers, but much of the metal industry was directed into the moors of the Atlantic slave trade. Who made the fetters, the chains, the manacles, the iron masters, and who were holding the iron factories? It was the Quakers. Who produced the kind of cannons that made the Royal Navy such a powerful force in the course of the 18th Century and then became the shepherds of the slave trade itself? It was the great Quaker iron masters. So there are really serious conflicts with Quakers between their ethical dislike of slavery and their pursuit of economic interest. As an old former Quaker friend of mine said, it's really a story of classic Quaker, high principle and low cunning. You do not need to take that kind of cynical line, but one can claim that there is an element of that in it. Nonetheless, without the Quakers, abolition would not have got off the ground, because it was the Quakers who nag away at this and who, in the 1780s, begin to persuade ever-more people that there was something deeply wrong about it.

The other turning point in the 1780s is the fact that the British lose the American colonies, and they lose them by persuading: one of the things that they do is to persuade a large number of slaves in North America to join the losing British side. They do not know it is losing at the time but they joined the British side, and then the British are left with large numbers of Africans and the offspring of Africans without an idea of what to do with them. You cannot turn them back to those great slave holders, the proponents of the Revolution, Tom Jefferson and Washington. African people who had freed themselves knew that if they stayed in America they would simply return to the servile state that had been their lot since they got off the slave ships. So they joined the British, and the British scattered them to Nova Scotia, to Sierra Leone later, and to London. It's that whole debate in the 1780s about what to do with the freed blacks from North America that focused attention on the question of slavery. There are large numbers of black people who accumulate as poor beggars in the City of London, and who become a political and social issue, and this helps to focus British attention on what to do about slavery.

There had been a long debate in English courts about slavery in England. Any number of cases that had cropped up and had been promoted by the one man who is something of a hero of the abolition movement, Granville Sharp. He had set himself the task, from the 1760s onwards, of making sure that full legal rights were applied to black people as well as white in this country. A whole series of what appeared to be small legal cases actually had profound consequences for the political debate about black freedom.

The most famous one of course is the Somerset case of 1772, where the Lord Chief Justice Lord Mansfield - and of course there is going to be an exhibition in his house at Kenwood to commemorate 1807 - Lord Justice Mansfield had to decide whether it was legal to force a black person to leave England against their wish. He decided it was not, and the consequences of that were enormous. He effectively ended slavery in England. That was not the legal point he was making, but it had that effect.

More than that we know that within three months slaves in Virginia had heard of this story, and were pressing their masters to give them the freedom which they said blacks in England had. It was an extraordinary global network of information within the black community: black people passing information they had picked up in London as soon as they step off the ship, passing it on to their friends in Jamaica, in Virginia.

But Mansfield also presided over the other infamous case, and that of course is the case of the Zong in 1783; the case of the
Liverpool slave ship captained by Luke Conningwood, where 133 Africans were thrown overboard in 1781. He claimed that he had made an error of navigation, and he had the crew throw 133 Africans overboard - 131 died, and one managed to scramble back up the nets. In 1783, when that case came up in an English court heard by Lord Justice Mansfield it was a case about insurance - did insurance adequately cover this act? Because no one was tried for murder it caused extraordinary outrage. Here again is an example of the kind of black networks. Granville Sharp, the old foot soldier of black interests in this country, was told of it by Equiano, the man who becomes something of a spokesman for blacks in the 1780s and 1790s; an African who brings news about something that has happened in the Atlantic to a white supporter. Here we see extraordinary networks. But the point I am trying to make here is that even as late as 1783, an English court sat in judgement about what was actually a heinous crime - the killing of 130-odd African people - and the crime itself went unpunished. For black people living in this country, then and now, that is a very significant fact. It is an extraordinarily significant fact because it is something that in the grand historical narrative does not seem to figure and is not considered to be terribly important, but it is very important to large numbers of black people living in this country.

So we had the Quakers, the American war, the law cases, and then a small group of people, Wilberforce and other friends, that formed together to decide to do something about the horrific institution of the Atlantic slave trade. They would like to end slavery but they realise it is not practical, so the best thing is to go for a more tactical target, and that was the Atlantic slave trade: stopping ships leaving English ports.

At that point, along comes Thomas Clarkson. He had written an essay in Cambridge about slavery being wrong, and he realised that if the essay as a theoretical argument was true, then he must do something about it, and he then committed his life to campaigning against the slave trade. He is the foot soldier of the abolition movement. He travels tens of thousands of miles up and down the country on horseback, gathering information, interviewing slave captains, interviewing people who had lived on the plantations, compiling dossiers of information. That information is not merely spread around the increasingly literate country in pamphlets, tracts, in lectures, but equally, more and more people hear of it in Parliament. The evidence is paraded through different Parliamentary hearings, and what people begin to hear about are the crude realities of life on the slave ships, and when they hear about it they do not like it.

There is no doubt that this is the brilliant propaganda exercise of the abolitionists. It persuades ever more people that this is a grotesque outrage that is very hard to justify. It was good business, it was a good trade, and it also makes possible the sweetening of English taste, but can you justify it on those grounds? The question becomes more acute when the evidence about what happens to female slaves began to circulate. This promoted the growth of a women's movement, a very effective political movement in the 1780s and '90s, British women campaigning on behalf of black women in the Americas, adds a kind of female dimension to this whole campaign, which shifts the whole nature of the abolition movement. It gives it a female voice, in a way it never had before.

We can actually see all this represented in the petitions that were sent to Parliament. In fact, the parliamentary exhibition that is going to be in Westminster Hall from May through to September is going to focus on two things: firstly, the petitions that came in, with thousands of names on them from up and down the country, from high and low, from men and women, signing their objections to the slave trade. Secondly, it is going to focus on Thomas Clarkson's chest; this wooden chest that he filled up gradually over the years with bits and pieces of African commodities. He said, 'Listen, we do not have to trade in humanity. We can actually do good business with Africa by trading for timber, bark, spices, gold.' Why was our currency the guinea? It came from West Africa. It did not have to be humanity for Africa lure the ships of Liverpool.

The other element in all this of course were the churches, and again it is not a very fashionable thing to say. I would not have given a lecture with this angle even 20 years ago. The more I look at this, the clearer it becomes that the churches play a critical role, but more particularly, the non-conformists and Methodists. If you think of that fading group of people today, it is hard to imagine what an extraordinarily expansive and vociferous group they were in the late-18th Century. The non-conformists, the Baptists and the Methodists, lent their growing numbers to the campaign against the slave trade. He is the foot soldier of the abolition movement. He travels tens of thousands of miles up and down the country on horseback, gathering information, interviewing slave captains, interviewing people who had lived on the plantations, compiling dossiers of information. That information is not merely spread around the increasingly literate country in pamphlets, tracts, in lectures, but equally, more and more people hear of it in Parliament. The evidence is paraded through different Parliamentary hearings, and what people begin to hear about are the crude realities of life on the slave ships, and when they hear about it they do not like it.

That particular book, written by Equiano as a contribution to the campaign, was published for the first time, by himself, in 1789. I bought a first edition of that in 1967 in York for five shillings. I had no idea who Equiano was back then and I had no idea of the significance of that book. I bought it out of curiosity. He is going to have a face on a postage stamp this month. If you had told me in 1967 that this was a man whose face would appear on British stamps, I just simply would not have believed it. In fact, his
face flickered on the interior of the Dome, that ill-fated Millennium evening, when the Queen and the Prime Minister sang Old Lang Syne. This is a man who has gone from utter anonymity to centrality in ways that are very hard to explain, unless you remember that it is a reflection of how Britain has changed, that black people’s role in this country has been transformed out of all recognition in our own adult lifetimes. But there is more to it than that, because what this is saying is that we are looking at an area of historical experience that is much more central than we have ever imagined.

Something else happens that gives abolition and the campaign to end the slave trade a twist. It was full of political twists and turns: up and down, it goes back, it moves forward. But the one thing that transforms it is the impact of the French Revolution, after 1789, but particularly the seismic upheaval of the revolt in Saint Domingue in Haiti. The slaves overthrew the slave system in Saint Domingue in 1791, at which point the British tried to seize that island for our own material colonial interests, and the British Army was defeated. It is a little known fact that the British Army and Navy that invade suffered losses amounting to the best part of 40,000 men. It was the first defeat of a white European army by a black ex-slave army in recorded history. It was the first time a colonial power was rebuffed by indigenous peoples, and it was not to be repeated, in the British case, until the fall of Singapore. It is of that significance, and of course it sent tremors throughout the Caribbean: if this could happen in Haiti, it could easily happen 150 miles away in Jamaica, or elsewhere down the Leewards and Windwards. In fact, trouble did fan and ripple through the islands. Planters realised that they could only keep the lid on this by the most draconian of savage systems against their slaves, and if they did not, they go the way of Haiti.

It was at that point of course that people turned to Wilberforce and said, ‘You have brought this about by encouraging black people to believe that they are men and brothers.’ At that point of course, you need to bear in mind two other factors. These are the two extraordinary images: the Wedgwood Medallion of the kneeling, supplicant slave, ‘Am I not a Man and a Brother?’; and the Brooke slave ship, the cross section and the plan of the ship. Those are images which a lot of people today have tremendous difficulty dealing with. The supplicant, kneeling slave in chains begging the white man to give him his freedom was the first design which the Royal Mint wanted for the new £2 coin. It was rejected as being too supplicant and submissive, and they came up with something else. But in the 1780s and 1790s, it didn’t appear that way. This had a quite dramatic effect. The propaganda effect of those two images is very hard to overstate. They swung huge amounts of opinion behind it. When people looked at the cross section of the Brookes and saw 480 Africans lying, sardine-like, they realised the kind of human reality of what was happening on British ships crossing the Atlantic. It should be remembered that British slave ships crossing the Atlantic could be smelled five or seven miles downwind because of the human filth that the slaves were wallowing in as they pitched their way westwards to the plantations of the Americas. This was a brutal system, which the British had come to realise and saw it was unjustifiable.

However, I need to give a few more cautionary factors about how we should rethink 1807. First of all, the slave trade is abolished, but it does not end. There is an illicit slave trade across the Atlantic. The Royal Navy, once, the shepherd of the slave system, now harries the slave trade as it elicits slave traders. Nonetheless about 1.5 million Africans are shipped across the Atlantic after 1807, mainly to Brazil and Cuba. So there is a very powerful slave trade continuing, despite British efforts, and that is not to mention the interior slave trades within North Africa particularly the Sahara, and nor is it to mention the East African slave trade to what was called Arabia. So the slave trades continue and so too does slavery. The British do not abolish their own slave system in the Americas and in the Caribbean, until 1833-38. When the British finally end their own slave systems in the 1830s, they set aside £20 million compensation - not for the slaves, but for the slave owners. It was the largest single capital outlay that British Parliament produced, apart from warfare, in the period up to that point - £20 million in the 1830s is a huge amount of money.

That has an extraordinary modern resonance, because when arguments about reparations emerge, as they do all the time now what people are aware of is the fact that Parliament was able to find money to compensate the slave owners. I do not want to get sidetracked here about reparations, but the point I would simply want to make is that the argument about reparations is rooted historically. This is not some kind of barmy hair-brained scheme of people who just want a little bit of money - it might not even be about money - it is rooted originally in the fact that Parliament compensated the slave owners.

Slavery survives. The slave trade survives. When the British realise that there was a labour vacuum in certain parts of the world and they were not able to fill them with slaves, created a new form of indentured labour. There were hundreds of thousands of indentured Indians that were shipped out of Calcutta into the Caribbean, East Africa, South Africa and into the South Pacific to fill the labour vacuum that would have been filled in a previous century by African slaves. So that, as an old Australian friend of mine said, ‘You folks are very extravagant with the lives of others,’ ‘you folks’ being the British. Therefore, the sense of triumphalism that the British might feel able to indulge in about 1807 has got to be set in this context as well. Slavery continues - in America till the 1860s, in Brazil till 1888. The slave trade itself dies away in the 1860s, but continues. 1807 is not quite the turning point.
that people have made it out to be. It is very important, but the major point to make is that 1807 is not the end of slavery, slavery continues. Indeed, for those who take the long view, you just have to see the work of Anti-Slavery International. It has got young officers out in the field all over the place doing extraordinarily brave work, in Asia and Africa, confronting slave systems today. There are difficulties about what you mean by slavery, and I am not saying that one is the same as the other, but nonetheless the institution of slavery survives, as has been relayed in the media endlessly these last few weeks. So 1807 is much more problematic than it might appear to be at first sight.

In two weeks' time, Her Majesty the Queen is going to be at a service of remembrance in Westminster Abbey to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the passing of the slave trade. Only a few weeks ago, the Prime Minister threw a reception to talk to people who have been involved in preparing for 2007. Again, if you had said to me 18 months ago all of this would take place, I simply would not have believed it. If you log onto the Department of Culture's website to see all the events taking place in this country this coming few months, you will see an extraordinary richness of activities. The Ministry of Education has announced that it's going to include the compulsory study of slavery and the slave trade in the National Curriculum. This has percolated down to a degree that no one could really have imagined. The point that I want to conclude with is that the story of slavery, the slave trade and the campaign against it, is a story which takes you right to the heart of the British historical experience. This is not a story simply about West Africa, the West Indies, Brazil, or North America; it is a story about Britain. It is a story that actually engages British experience. Think of the tens of thousands of men on the slave ships. Think of the whole swaths of British industries that fuelled the slave ships of the Atlantic. Every slave ship that sailed out of Liverpool and Bristol was packed to the gunnels with commodities produced by British manufacturers - metal goods, woolen goods, mines, trying to ship through France cowry shells from the Indian Ocean, Indian textiles. When you think that Africans were being exchanged on the coast of Africa for cowry shells that come from the Maldives Islands, that were shipped through London, you realise that you are looking at a quite extraordinary global economy. Not only that, the slave trade is an economically complex system that requires bills of credit, like travellers' cheques if you will. Men travel with these bills of credit that are exchangeable in Europe, West Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean - you are looking at the creation of global international finance that has its heart only yards from here, but which is all made possible by the shipping of Africans into the Americas. Without the Africans, none of this would have taken place.

Let me end by one simple Yorkshire example. Many of you in this room will know the place itself, and that is the extraordinarily delightful stately home at Harewood House, halfway between Leeds and Harrogate, the home of Lord Harewood. That was built, from the 1750s onwards. Of course, the heads of the family were not always Lord Harewoods; they were Lascelles, a small, gentry, farming family in North Yorkshire. They made their money in sugar, out of London and Bristol; a trading house in London and one in Bristol. The money they made as merchants was transformed into banking - into lending - and when people could not pay their debts, they took over the plantations. They owned, at the peak of their careers, 49 plantations scattered between Barbados and Jamaica. They were suppliers of supplies to the Royal Navy throughout the Caribbean. They were collector of custom duty in Barbados which provided the opportunity in the 18th Century to skim off the top. They were hugely wealthy, and they were hugely wealthy on the back of the slave system. I had written an article about this - the kind of article that academics write where only about 15 people on Earth will ever read - and the last sentence I had said, 'Who would look at Harewood House, as you walk round it today, with its Chippendale furnishing, its garden by Capability Brown, who would look at this place and ever imagine it had anything whatsoever to do with Africans and the Caribbean, but without it, none of that would have taken place.' Without the Africans, it could not have happened. I got a very tart reply from his Lordship that this was journalism of the worst possible kind! I can understand the problem that he faces, because here is a direct line of descent between a family that once owned plantations and the family that now lives in this quite splendid place in West Yorkshire.

That is just one illustration of a more general point, and that is that the slave empire came home in ways that we do not recognise. Who would walk through the grounds of Harewood House and imagine it has anything to do with the slave empire of the Americas? But it had everything to do with it. At this point, I will conclude by simply saying that the importance of this subject is not merely its own intrinsic interest, which it has, but the fact that what it does is speak to the way Britain became what it was. When the British first played and sang 'Rule Britannia' in the 1740s for the succession of a new George, the Royal Navy was ruling the waves, but at the very time the British were carrying 40,000 Africans across the Atlantic. 'Never will be slaves' - but that did not apply to the peoples of Africa. At that point of course, you are aware of the fact that the slave trade and the slavery of the Americas is not merely something that creates new communities in the Americas which creates wellbeing in the Americas that comes back here, but it actually speaks to British experience. It is a part of what made Britain what it was. At this point, you realise that here is something that tells us about, not merely what we were, but what we are.