

Interview Date:	01-09-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Geoff Palmer	Organisation:	N/A
Position:	Public Figure		

Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Geoff Palmer. 01-09-2020

Tom Crowley 0:01

So, we are recording. So, this is the first of September 2020. And it's Tom Crowley from Cambridge Heritage Research Centre speaking to Professor Sir Geoff Palmer. And, Geoff, if I can start off with the first question, which is can you give me a run through of your work over the years addressing the legacy of slavery and in particular, your work on the Melville Monument?

Geoff Palmer 0:32

Well, I would say, you know, it's difficult to know exactly when to start. For example, I've got some books behind me, where I produced a little book called the Enlightenment Abolished Citizens of Britishness, that's what the book is called. And I printed it myself, and therefore I can do what I like with it. And behind me, I've noticed if I've looked from 2007, from the first version. It's about, you know, a quarter of an inch thick. And now it is nearly— it's over an inch thick. A lot of what's in that book is about slavery. It's about my early life, which I never paid any attention to. And it was about 2007 when we had the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade, in 2007. That was 200 years. And therefore, the momentum just picked up then, because people began to ask me to give lectures on something which I didn't know a lot about. And therefore, I had to be— to inform myself about my own history and that escalated to my involvement in what I'm doing today.

So, if we go back to 2007, what triggered it? As I said it was the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade. Now what I'd done then— I did two things. I tried to find a house of somebody involved in slavery, which wasn't far from me, so I could go and have a look at it. I wanted to see where a slave owner lived. I don't know why, but I wanted to do that. And the other thing I decided on is the sort of lateral research thinking which I do my barley research. I thought I needed to make a telephone directory. And I've got it here. The Jamaica Telephone Directory from 2007. You're probably one of the first people to see it over the distance, but this was also critical. Because I thought if Scotland was involved in Jamaica to the level that I started to perceive, then it should be reflected in the Jamaica Telephone Directory in terms of surnames.

So, a telephone directory arrived from Jamaica. And it is now history, if you type in Jamaica Telephone Directory, it will come up on Google because what we found was that for example, I looked up Campbell and there are about 2500 Campbells in the Jamaica Telephone Directory. There are only 1000 say 500 in Edinburgh and Lothians Telephone

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Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

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The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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Directory. So therefore, if you look at the Campbell name in Jamaica in terms of area there are more Campbell's in Jamaica than in Scotland. And that drove me to look at other aspects of this, what I now call Scottish Caribbean connection.

I then looked at the home of a slave owner, notorious, and it was James Wedderburn. The Wedderburn family were deeply involved in the slavery. They went to Jamaica as young boys after the war there and they were like, you know, like teenagers. And they went to Jamaica and they stayed and did not come back till — so 1746. They didn't come back to Scotland till about the 1770s. So, they stayed in Jamaica, all that period, becoming very rich and powerful slave owners. And Inveresk Lodge, just outside Musselburgh you know, Edinburgh Musselburgh and the village called Inveresk. And it's James Wedderburn's house. And when he came back from Jamaica, he bought it. And it is now owned by, I think, the National Trust. However, you're allowed to go in and I went in, and I stood in the garden where a slave owner stood.

I stood, you know, looking into the window, where a slave owner sat with his family. And I looked down to the garden, which dropped down. And that reminded me, I've seen a slave plantation in Jamaica, and it was roughly the same. You're up where the house is and then it drops down and the persons down in the garden can't see you. But you can see them. Therefore, somehow the whole — I've visited that place many times in order — I wanted to get a feel of or connection with the slavery which in Jamaica I didn't know about and what I did, I then arranged a walk to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade, a walk from Musselburgh up to the Lodge and lots of people attended. I also contacted Lord Bill Wedderburn.

So, it's a lovely story in that the Wedderburn family, the two boys, left, went to Jamaica and James Wedderburn had a child with or had children, but this child was different in terms of as a link with what I'm not talking about. Wedderburn had children with these Black slaves, but this boy was Robert Wedderburn, was one of his children from a slave called Rosanna.

So, we know a lot about you know, Robert Wedderburn. He left Jamaica after his father left, he left and he came to England and he tried to find his father. So, he came to Scotland and came to Inveresk Lodge where his father lived in described his state and his father rejected him. Told him, you should go away. And I think, Robert Wedderburn in his book, which I have over there. He wrote a book Robert Wedderburn called the Horrors of Slavery. And he said in that book, that his father gave him a sixpence and a pint of beer and told him to go away. And he did. And he went back to England, and he was involved in helping white workers like at the Peterloo massacre, he supported their position. He was a real radical because he went to prison a couple of times, for attacking the King and those who are involved in slavery.

Lord Bill Wedderburn is a descendant of Robert Wedderburn. Lord Bill Wedderburn was made a Lord by, I think it was the Labour Party. And he was a Professor. I think he was an economist. And he was in the House of Lords. And I'd done all my research then on the Wedderburns and I then realised that he was connected. But I was a little embarrassed to contact him and he rang me just by chance to say he heard about the work I was doing. And you know, if you'd like to keep in touch, well, after he did that, I then contacted him and said, would you come to Edinburgh? I'm going to have a walk, an abolition of the slave trade walk, and he said, yes, he come. So, he and his wife drove up from London. And he came on the

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walk and, you know, he gave us a speech. And everybody was delighted. So, I would regard that as the beginning of my work and interest in this history because what the little work that I did on the telephone directory and the Wedderburns told me was there was a lot more to do. Because there are other families who were involved. And so therefore, that's how I started this work.

Tom Crowley 10:36

Wonderful. Thank you very much. That's a wonderful story.

Geoff Palmer 10:40

I've never related it like that. But that was the beginning.

Tom Crowley 10:45

Well, it's great to have in the archive. That's a wonderful story. And then how do things— at what point did you turn your attentions to the monument of Dundas?

Geoff Palmer 10:59

Well what happened after that is that I, you know, after the Wedderburns I started checking other families. I looked then at the Grants of Speyside because you know, the Grants had a slave plantation called Monymusk, and then I began to put the links together. So, there is a Monymusk in Jamaica. I knew it because even as a boy in Jamaica, I didn't know what Monymusk was, but we used to run around the streets in Kingston shouting at each other Monymusk. It was a word, which we felt had some sort of terror in it. So, we had no idea this was a town in Scotland, near Aberdeen, and then I checked with a little bit of my research and I found that the Grant's slave plantation was called Monymusk in Jamaica. And that there's a Monymusk town, outside Aberdeen. So, I then looked at the Grant's history in Jamaica. And it's significant in that they owned a plantation I think in Clarendon.

And they had a rum brand. They also had links even with, you know, using James Watt's engine to improve the efficiency of their plantation. They also had links with a notorious slave owner called Oswald. And Richard Oswald was a young man that left Scotland went to Jamaica, and he met the Grants and the Grants encouraged him to marry a young lady I think it's Mary Ramsey. And so, she becomes Mrs. Oswald. And they, after they were married, they came back to Scotland and

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Oswald then bought a really big house in Ayrshire in Scotland, and that house is called Auchencruive House. It's in the village of Auchencruive.

Now the reason for that story about Oswald marrying Mary Ramsey, and she becomes Mrs. Ramsey. Burns wrote a poem, Robert Burns. And the poem is called Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald of Auchencruive. Now, a lot of people had no idea what that poem was about or who Mrs Oswald was. That is who Mrs. Oswald was. She was a young woman who inherited her father's plantations in Jamaica. And this is quite common, where a lot of men married women who had inherited plantations as one way of immediately becoming wealthy. But also, may not have needed that because with the Grants Jamaica, he and the Grants established an island called Bunce Island. Near Sierra Leone, and they use that as a slave port to buy and sell slaves.

And I saw a programme other day and they were looking at Bunce Island and they were speaking to the African curators and people there who were looking after the Island now and they know the history of the Oswalds and the Grants. And therefore also, when he married Mary Ramsay he had his own money, but he also got hers as part of a wedding thing. So, they're living in Auchencruive, and then Robert Burns— I was told that because when she died in about 1789, they turfed him out of his lodgings. And he didn't like the idea of it. So, he went away and wrote that poem. But what's the importance of that poem? The poem is about Mrs. Oswald. And to me, it's part of this Black history, which you wouldn't know. However, when you read that poem, you come to probably the most significant line about the attitudes of people who enslaved people in the Caribbean and why they did it. And their attitude. And there's one line in that poem, Ode Sacred to the Memory of Mrs. Oswald of Auchencruive, and it reads: she hands that took, but never gave. And to me, that line has resonated with me in terms of the work I do because about that. People who had hands that took, but never gave. And to me, that line has been sitting there since 1789. And I've never heard it, I've not read it anywhere. But I think it's so critical, and this is the importance of this history that you can't imagine that something is linked to it. And to me, that's the nature of what I've been doing is to try to find those kinds of links within this history.

So that's the Grants then I looked at, you know, other families, whether they were the Sterlings of Keir. And there's a lovely story, when I published one edition or version of my wee book, I had a phone call. And the phone call was a chap called Adrian Grant. And he said— he just rang me here in Penicuik, and he said, by the way, His Lordship, has seen your little book and he has a bone to pick with you. That's the head of the Grant Clan. So, I'm relating this for the first time, I've told it in lectures. But Adrian was on the phone and I'm thinking, you know, what's he talking about? So, I said, well, what is wrong? And he said, well, um, His Lordship says the Grants treated their slaves better than the Sterlings of Keir treated theirs. And I did respond by saying, I'm sure the slaves appreciated it.

So, again, you get a little— it's not all, you know, doom in terms of the public's reaction, the public has reacted in in many different ways. And one of the ways which has been significant for me is as I travelled all over Scotland, whether it's in the Borders up in the north, you know, beyond Inverness. I've stayed in Inverness, I went to a church gathering there and I stayed with people. And believe it or not, when I was in Inverness, I then realised that one of the most powerful slave owning families lived in Inverness. So, I said to my host, you know, do you know where the Baileys lived? And she said, oh,

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they're still up the road. So, we got in a car and we drove up there and this enormous house all framed round. You couldn't see in it, it's like an estate and you could drive past and you could see the fence, but you can't see the house really. And that's the Bailey family who were not linked to Jamaica. I think it's St. Kitts or one of the other islands. But they were notorious slave owners and became MPs. A Member of Parliament. And one of them made his famous comment that he was against abolition, one of the Baileys openly, and he just— I think he described abolitionists as low men. Because he saw them as breaking the law. The law was slavery was legal.

And that is an important part of the work I've been doing. Because why is the law important? It's important because when slavery was at its, you know— whether it was waning or whether people started to think about this thing won't last forever. When you look at the emancipation time, you know 1833 - 1834 when you look at the act, I've seen the [unintelligible] of it and it says compensation is being given because the slave owners were entitled and they were entitled because slavery in the Caribbean, chattel slavery, was legal and therefore the slave owners had to be compensated. They had to be compensated, like if you have insurance and you lose your car, then you're expecting compensation, you have lost your property, legally. And therefore, they had to be compensated. And of course, they were given 20 million, which is about 20 billion in today's money, and therefore this legality then started to interest me.

I'm not a lawyer. Um, however, I then started to look at issues that are related to this legality. And one of the issues is now an academic issue. And you may have heard of it. I'm sure you have it. The Joseph Knight case. Right? Well, this is very important. There's a novel called Joseph Knight written by Robertson. Now, why is that important? Because it's going to be linked to what we're going to talk about Henry Dundas. Because this is where, you know, we really first heard of him significantly, he was around, he was a lawyer. And he was involved in one legal case before that. And it involved a Black person who he said was a slave and couldn't testify. However, the big issue about Dundas starts with the Joseph Knight case. And the Joseph Knight case followed. Again, it's this aspect of legality, a case in England.

In 1772 there is the Somerset case. Lord Mansfield said the slaver couldn't take a Black person out of England back into slavery and that is regarded as a significant step in the relationship between Black people in the law and Britain. However, in Scotland, which a lot of people also may not recognise, is that in 1774, so between 1772 and 1774 we have a situation again linked with the Weddburns. James Wedderburn, his brother is called John. When the Wedderburns went to Jamaica as young boys. They went after their father was hanged.

So, because of the war, the father's on the wrong side, he's taken to London and he's hanged. And that's probably one of the reasons why the boys left. However, the title must have been— you know, you could inherit it. So, John Wedderburn, the elder brother got the title. So, this Joseph Knight case is involving Sir John Wedderburn, brother. And it's about him bringing back a boy when they came back from Jamaica, you know, near the 1770s, that sort of thing. He brought this boy back, and they're living in in Perth and Scotland. And the boy, the story goes, he must have heard of the Somerset case. And therefore, he decided he didn't want to serve Sir John Wedderburn anymore.

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So, he leaves. Of course Wedderburn took the case to the— I think was first not the sheriff's court I think it was the Justice of the Peace, who rules that the boy should go back to Wedderburn and work, you know, as house boy or servant or whatever. The boy then wasn't satisfied with that. And this is where the case becomes complicated because [unintelligible] boy servant / slave apparently takes the case— gets to the sheriff's court. And the Sheriff then rules that the slave laws of Jamaica don't apply here. And therefore, the boy is free.

Sir John Wedderburn is not satisfied with that. He takes the case to the Court of Session as the highest court and the case runs between 1774 and 1776. Okay. No, it goes to 1776, and that's when Dundas became involved. The total case is 1774 to 1778. But the 1776 date is Dundas. So, the case is in court for two years, and then Dundas appears, and he's the Lord Advocate then. So, he's the top law boss of Scotland. The top law boss of Scotland and he apparently pleaded for Joseph Knight. And academics, this is not a powerful academic issue. Because Dundas, the Lord Advocate who later on is involved in slavery. But here he is in 1776 saying that this is what the academics have said, because I've never I never saw the papers, so I've just got to hear what's being said. And that's what the public knows that Dundas pleaded for Knight. And his pleading almost drove his freedom. Okay. The case then goes on to 1778.

And there were 12 judges, some of the most powerful legal minds ever in Scotland. You've got Lord Auchinleck, which is James Boswell's father. You've got Lord Arniston, Dundas' half-brother, was the president of the judges. You've got Lord Keynes. You've got Lord Braxfield, you know, the judge who was pretty tough on the Scottish Martyrs, got them transported. Braxfield was there, Gardenstone. So, you've got some of the most powerful legal minds involved in a case of a Black boy who doesn't want to work for his master. So anyway, the case ends in 1778 and he is released on the same reason that the Sheriff released him, the laws of Jamaica don't apply here, that means the slave laws, and therefore he can go free. And Scotland, therefore now this is where my contention comes in, Scotland abolished slavery in 1778, on the release of Joseph Knight.

Now, my contention is, is that I find it worrying that there is a comparison between the release of Joseph Knight and the abolition of slavery. Before emancipation in 1833-34 when the slave owners were compensated and 1838 when slavery was totally abolished, British slavery, we have the abolition of slavery in Scotland in 1778. To cut a long story short, as such because I've challenged things, what I've said is Joseph Knight wasn't a slave. I say prove to me was a slave. That has been difficult. One the most powerful academics in Scotland. He is a legal professor. The closest he's come is that he was in servitude, in other words, a slave. And my view, although not a lawyer, I'm saying, you cannot abolish slavery without a slave. And therefore, in all arguments about slavery, definition is critical.

Tom Crowley 31:37

The agenda behind 1778 abolition in Scotland argument feels like a nationalist agenda, I think.

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Geoff Palmer 31:49

Well, to me, this is, you know, one of the things when people you know, listen to this, it's for the public to decide because I'm saying I've got a feeling it's partly to balance the English decision of 1772 you know, and Dundas and people like that were very aware of that. And he had a career, which he's looking forward to. But one of the critical aspects of that, because of Douglass's involvement, I then go— I went to have a look at the, you know, I was given the page from the Caledonian Mercury newspaper of 1776 where that case is recorded. So, I read what Dundas said. And what he did say was— you know, there's an argument about, you know, he took some phrases and statements from an English judge. Lord Hold [Mansfield?]. Where Hold said, the air of— once you land in England, you're free. The English air doesn't support slavery. So, if you're alive as a Black person in England, you can't be a slave. This is a so-called teleological logic playing at the time, you can use that. But it is critical because Dundas was using the same. He was saying Scottish air doesn't support slavery. So that's why Knight could go. However, what he does say in that newspaper piece: every Black man in Jamaica is a slave. None of the historians ever stated that.

Tom Crowley 33:51

So, people have been very keen to take this— not to tell the full story, effectively to take the idea of Dundas as someone who advocated for Knight being a free man within Scotland. Has that been the kind of subsequent interpretation of Dundas'—

Geoff Palmer 34:08

That's the beginning, yeah. And because what it is— you type in Joseph Knight, you know, you'll see a lot of it is there. It is still so contentious that one of the most senior professors in Scotland in the area, only a month or two ago published Joseph Knight and the End of Slavery. And end is abolished. Another historian was challenging me and saying end doesn't mean abolished. Of course it does. And the point is that it is still there a couple of months ago. So, what we have is this tussle and I've you know, I'm just beginning now to enjoy this. If you start challenging things you're going to be attacked.

So, one of the things is this Professor gave three lectures, one-hour duration each. And that was last year. And in [unintelligible] he refers to me as something like, you know that I am, you know, I really don't understand what I'm talking about. The point is that I'm saying he wasn't a slave. This is pointless calling Joseph Knight, enslaved servant, to get a slave, to come to a slave. And I'm saying that is a oxymoron, you can't have an enslaved servant. And thus, the argument is now stuck. It stuck from a Jamaican boy who came here as a migrant in a boat in 1955. I'm no lawyer. But I'm saying that, that doesn't make sense. The point is as you've said quite rightly, a lot of our history now is these anomalies. Because if people believe they've abolished something, then they have no responsibility. They see themselves as being, you know, we have

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made our contribution. And I'm saying that's a deception. The Scottish people don't want that. And that's what I've been challenging: to say people are trying to avoid this responsibility.

The George Floyd case has brought it out. We're seeing how slavery, what it's done, the policeman is involved in a crucifixion. It's the law acting outside the law. And therefore, I am very worried about these dodges. Where you know, we've taken Colston's statue down. So, we've done a good thing you know, so we can go home and have a rest. You know, we've got the Joseph Knight case where we did that. But what frightens me is we have academics, highly educated, who are driving it still. You know, and therefore, here we have, it's about the law. But why now, if we get back to Dundas, why now he's critical, because what they didn't report, although he said Joseph Knight was free here. What he was saying is reaffirming slavery in the Caribbean. In his little speech, he said, every Black man in Jamaica is a slave.

Therefore, with that attitude from 1776, when he gets into power in 1791, you know 1776 - 1791, he's now Home Secretary he is the most powerful man in Scotland. You know, Prime Minister Pitt never came to Scotland. Kings never came for over 100 years. So, Dundas is— his nickname was Henry the Ninth, the uncrowned king of Scotland. Those were his nicknames, historical. So, in 1792 he is Home Secretary and Wilberforce put forward, you know, immediate abolition. In 1792, I think it was unsuccessful in 1791. 1792. But you had all these negative things around the abolition. For example, Boswell, I've mentioned him, his father was one of the judges, and everybody's heard of Boswell and Johnson. You know, this is the same Boswell, he actually wrote a poem in 1791. I think I've got the date, right, 1791, during all this abolition talk. And he wrote a poem saying, you know, you shouldn't abolish slavery. Slaves are better off, Black people are better off as slaves. That's the essence of that point.

Dundas then in 1792 when Wilberforce put forward the bill for immediate abolition, Dundas amended it to gradual abolition and that got through. And that's where we start with Dundas and slavery. Because if you look on Twitter this morning, the argument is absolutely rife between myself and when I talk to people, because what I think the history shows and is documented— a lot of these books in here are associated with that. If you look at Colson[?], who was one of the abolitionists, he says quite clearly, that between 1792 and say 1800 Dundas opposed the abolition of the slave trade. He opposed it.

Tom Crowley 41:09

Did he have personal investments in slavery?

Geoff Palmer 41:30

Well, this is it, you know, it would be the obvious thing to— as you've asked, why would he oppose the abolition, great powerful politician, because he not only was he Home Secretary, he became Secretary of State for War. I think in about

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1794 he was Secretary of State for War. Now, you've asked the right question: why would he want to oppose it? And I think that, one historian, his book is across there [gestures to bookcase] his view was, when he wrote his book in late 1990s, the book is called the Dundas Despotism. And in it he describes the most horrific things that Dundas did. Because it's about despotism. And that book, I'll go and get it, there Dundas Despotism. And in that book he describes the various things Dundas did politically. It's not only about slavery. For example, He facilitated the transportation of the Scottish Martyrs, because he didn't want any democracy in terms of ordinary people voting. He managed the politics by making sure that the Scottish MPs voted the way he did or wanted them to vote. He managed— because he was Secretary of State for War, he was managing the French and Spanish fighting in the Caribbean for islands, for slave islands. You know, he was in San Domingo, that's Haiti now. And he lost 40,000 British troops in San Domingo in the 1790s. Why did he do that? Jamaica was the most profitable British slave Island. It had 300,000 slaves at the end of slavery, out of 800,000.

So, Dundas's act was self-serving in terms of his political ambitions. But he was under the misguided belief or maybe he was being be virtuous; he's doing this for Britain, to make Britain money. Because money was coming from slavery and he didn't want, you can't abolish a trade. When slaves have got a lifespan of less than 10 years, so he's being very practical. And therefore, this is the great debate. People like Wilberforce and even the Prime Minister Pitt all voted for immediate abolition. Burke, Fox, all those guys are voting for immediate abolition. But somehow when we look at it very carefully, you know, I believe Pitt was powerful enough with the king, they could stop it. But it's one of these things. I've got Pitt's speeches over there. And in that time when Dundas did the gradual abolition Pitt made the longest speech ever in our Parliament. It started one day and then went on to the morning. 1792 Pitt was responding to Dundas' gradual proposal. And in that speech, because I've been over it so many times, this is Pitt's take on gradual abolition. Pitt's take on it is this: waiting for some contingency, refusing to act until a thousand favourable circumstances unite. It meant never. However, it was defeated. And Dundas had his way.

Now, what I said during that period, we had the French Revolution going on, but Dundas focused on San Domingo, in a sense that that was the French's most profitable colony. The slaves had started a rebellion in 1791, I think. And therefore, there was great confusion there. But what Dundas' view was he could promote that rebellion. So, the irony is there he is promoting a slave rebellion because he wants to destroy the colony and he lost 40,000 British troops doing that because he wants Jamaica to be the most profitable. He didn't want any competition.

Now historians then battled with me, I've argued they're saying that, you know, Dundas couldn't do anything about the gradual. The House of Lords, you know, wouldn't act on it. They just let it rest. The House of Lords could have done something. Dundas had links with the House of Lords. I've got a letter of his over there where he's writing to one Lord, he was just off to vote against all the proposals for the abolition of the slave trade. 1796. And Clarkson was correct. He was there, Clarkson. And he's saying he opposed Wilberforce and that went on till he was impeached in 1806.

So, from 1792 to 1806, we have this: Dundas is selecting the governors for India. He chose the Duke of Wellington's brother as the Governor of India, he chose Lord Balcarres as Governor of Jamaica. Balcarres transported the Maroons after the Maroon War to Nova Scotia. He picked the governor for I think it's Grenada, Ninian Home and he got killed and the

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The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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Interviewee:	Geoff Palmer	Organisation:	N/A
Position:	Public Figure		

Homes still have the property down in the Borders you know, which was linked to the family. So, what we have was Dundas was picking governors, he knew to control, just like he did in Scotland. And therefore, we have a situation now where, what is the conflict about the statue. He was impeached in 1806. And Samuel Whitbread the Second impeached him. He realised funds were missing from the Navy. Dundas was also treasurer of the Navy. And Whitbread found this out. And the parliament voted that Dundas should be impeached. Albeit one vote. But that meant he had to resign. You see, because the present Viscount is saying, oh, yes, he was impeached, but he was freed or released.

What it was, there was a debate of where he should be tried, whether in a court or in the House of Lords. The point is that they voted first for the court, and then they changed it to impeach by the House of Lords. So, it didn't matter that result, because he had to resign anyway. Where a lot of historians haven't picked that up. They're saying, oh, he was then freed. But he was out the government. You know, government control he was in the Privy Council until probably he died in 1811 or something. The point is that his career ended with the impeachment in terms of the power he had and that's for taking some six million. This historian says of the Navy, that's the instrument of defence of the country. That's how I see it. And that's why I feel now what about his statue?

I'm saying that it shouldn't be taken down. You know, people taking other things down. My view is the next statue to be taken down should be racism. I don't want to remove a bit of metal or wood. And then people say they've done something for me on race. My view is my ancestors had to face slave owners and fight them with sticks and stones. And you tell me I can't look at a piece of metal. What I want is that metal to have a plaque stating what that person did. And that's what my view is about the Dundas statue. And we've been looking at this for some time. So, we had a committee of myself Ramsey, the Viscount and Michael Fry, whose book is Dundas Despotism.

Tom Crowley 51:51

Sorry, who's Ramsey? Who's the other person on the committee?

Geoff Palmer 51:55

Ramsey, Adam Ramsey. He was on the plaque committee. Right, so what happened was about three years ago, or more, at least three years, the Council because there was now all this debate about Dundas and the statute. And there was a plaque on it, and then it disappeared. And Ramsey had, this young man, I didn't know him very well then, had put up his own plaque, saying Dundas was involved in the gradual abolition of slavery. And it's been calculated that's about 630,000 people were transported into slavery because of gradual. And so, Ramsey constructed a temporary plaque, stuck it on, and the Council said, you know, they set up a committee. I was one member of that committee and the present Viscount and Michael Fry the historian or journalist and Adam Ramsey, and we sat there for about three years and got nowhere. Michael Fry and the Viscount frustrated it.

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Although he wrote a book on Dundas Despotism, Fry, he obstructed, they didn't want slavery on the plaque. Um, they don't even want impeachment when impeachment was on it before. So, we failed. And then, you know George Floyd's death. You know, myself and the public, we were debating things on Twitter or the media. And the Leader of the Council decided he was going to reform a committee and within five days, we had a narrative for the plaque, and not long ago, the narrative for that proposed plaque was put up in the gardens next to the statue.

Tom Crowley 54:11

Was it the same people on the committee or was it a new committee?

Geoff Palmer 54:19

It is a new committee, except for myself and the Council member in charge of culture who was in charge of the committee before. So, two of us were still in it, but the other people were new. One was the Vice Principal of Edinburgh University. And one was from the heritage organisation in Edinburgh. And there were other people there. So, it was a new committee except for two. And the narrative was produced. But since then, even though it's been put up and you can see it, you know, you can find it to show. We've had this debate where the Viscount had put up what a counsellor has called a substantive submission in opposition to the narrative on the plaque. Um, and that is, as I've said, you know, it's produced a delay, like Dundas' delay of the abolition of the trade, we've now got a delay and that's the irony. So that's another Dundas delay. But—

Tom Crowley 55:46

The new plaque has been installed and it's visible?

Geoff Palmer 55:51

It's not installed. It's a temporary plaque.

Tom Crowley 55:53

Oh, sorry.

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Geoff Palmer 55:55

So, they put up a temporary plaque with the narrative and therefore, what has happened is there's been a submission from the Viscount. He was very derisory by saying that the narrative is fake news. But that's just propaganda. However, what makes it worrying though for me, and I don't know for other people but, the Council has arrived on that narrative. There's been this submission and the Viscount is saying he's got historians, distinguished historian supporting his position.

What is disturbing and worrying is that he's got distinguished historians he's got Michael Fry, he's got Sir Tom Devine and he's got some Professor Young from maybe Oxford or one of the universities in England. So, what you have is therefore this delay and I cannot find what the justification for that is. A councillor has stated this in the local press and Evening News that, you know, he is a supporter of course of probably not putting the plaque up, but the main issue is the word— is slavery's on it. And somehow what this shows us is not— you know, if a choice was made to the people who are opposing the narrative would you rather have slavery on the plaque than take the statue down. They'd probably vote to take the statue down.

Removing a statue to me, is, when it comes down to it, the option that people would take because they don't want to be accused or associated with this slavery. And thus, we've got to be very careful of motives. Because all this battle, it has taken us 199 years to get slavery on that plaque. And as I say, it is still this debate and what has happened, I don't know their justifications or reason for these things, the Council has now put up a notice for comments, you know, for and against. And I find that a little unsettling, but you know, I won't comment. The point is that this is all about an individual. And who in order to silence me, as I said he called me a brewer in an article, this isn't, you know, a wild statement—

Tom Crowley 59:38

And that's the current Viscount?

Geoff Palmer 59:40

Oh, yeah, that's the current Viscount, the Tenth Viscount. He says, in contrast, he's got three powerful historians. In contrast to a brewer. But what I did point out, was that it was a brewer that impeached his ancestor. He didn't realise that. One of the cruel ironies. And one of the supporters actually wrote to me and said, and this is the prejudice, and this isn't race. Now this is class. Where somebody is saying that if we did it, he must have had help. The point is with Whitbread, he went to Oxford, Cambridge. He also went to Eton. And he was one of the most significant radicals supporting the Scottish Martyrs supporting education for the poor. And there's a school somewhere Whitbread Academy today. So, you know, to me that's where we still are. Where we don't give Black people rights because we've not been educated to do it. You

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know, it's been missing in our education. We are attacking somebody who has done something, they must be low working class, not educated enough to have the capacity. And he's being judged on this profession. You know? So that's still here.

So, this period is bringing out all those kinds of prejudices, which I believe education can solve. And I don't want any more pulling down statues or whatever, I want, and I hope other people will want exactly the same, that this history must be in the curriculum. Eventually, you know, we must get it in the curriculum, we must get a history of class and social change in the curriculum. When we talk about slavery, we must defy them. We must not stand around and let racist people make racist comments without saying, you know, I don't want to be part of that. To me, these are small things for a big problem, but you know we cannot change the past, but we can change the consequences of the past such as racism for the better. So, somehow my position is education based.

And ignorance is a great evil when it is contrived and this is where I think we are with the plaque, but I hope we can get the plaque up because it will put Scotland or Edinburgh or Britain on a very strong footing as far as the world is watching to say we've got the courage and the honesty to put a plaque on a statue which is 150 feet high. This man did things which were wrong. I mean, in this book, Fry's book, he says, part of his gradual abolition was to breed the slaves. You know, in that— because you're going to need slaves, if you will abolish the trade. Then part of his strategy was to have a breeding programme. Now, I've never seen any historian supporting that, you know, outside of Fry's book and when he wrote that it was something which showed your power you know, and, therefore, it was worth stating, you know, this is how powerful we were. Now he's slightly changed his tune, because that's no longer acceptable. But he nevertheless is acting in an obstructive way. When he says that in his book he was impeached, and he was guilty and that it was [unintelligible]. Yet he is obstructing today. So, he calls it today's politically correct, you know, people who are protesting, that's what he calls them in an article recently, where he and I were interviewed for the Sunday Times. And he said, that's how people behaved in the past. It's no big deal. I say to him, the past has consequences. You know, it's not saying oh, it's happened a long time ago. There are consequences and therefore we must address those or else.

Just two final stories. To show you we need better representation in the society because people— it's like this guy Whitbread, you know, he didn't have the capacity he was a brewer. Of course, it's insulted lots of my students who I've taught to be some of the best brewers in the world. And I would like to repeat what one of them said to me in response to that comment about me being a brewer. But other people have used similar attacks, like he's just a chemist, or he's just a barley person. In order to denigrate my position or views.

Tom Crowley 1:05:41

It's not an argument.

Geoff Palmer 1:05:42

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You see, the racist doesn't have an argument. He just has a view, you see. And that view is, I don't believe that's how it is. That's what I believe. And I usually put to my students when they used to say that, to me, this is what I believe or whatever. And I said, I usually say to them that there are two planes on the runway. One is built by a guy who believes he can build a plane, and the other one's built by a plane builder, qualified, which one would you fly in?

So, to me, that's people with beliefs— that's what it's based on. It's the pre judgement, it's the prejudices, you know, we fudged it by calling it— we've got all sorts of names, where we used to moderate and I don't accept, you know, unconscious bias is another one. There's no such thing. Prejudice is prejudice. We shouldn't make any excuses and therefore to me— I did a video for the Scottish government and it's called We Are Scotland and that is how I see it. So, all the prejudice or people would use against me is completely irrelevant, it won't stop me at my age I don't bother about things like that. I'm 80, so at 80 nothing matters very much. But I what matters to me is the education of young people and adults so that we regard ourselves as one humanity. Nothing less.

Tom Crowley 1:07:41

Just quickly before you have to go. Before we started recording, you were discussing the importance of keeping statues versus putting them in a museum. Would it be okay just to rehearse what you said before with regards to that now for the record?

Geoff Palmer 1:08:04

Okay, the trouble is I say these things then I forget. But I think what is important is that when we're talking about, you know, statues and monuments and removing them, my view has always been from this thing starting that you can't remove things from their context. Dundas's statue is at St Andrews Square, and it was put there by people who believed he was wonderful. There's a debate about that now where some people say, a lawyer is saying, the people were forced to contribute to that statue. Forced, it wasn't a voluntary contribution. Well, to me that's so important, because that's part of the history of that statue. If you take it down, you are taking it out of its context. You put it in a museum, then it no longer has its context. And therefore, the public must be able to see our history where it was made, why it was made, the decision. And therefore, you cannot then teach the truth of the history if you put it in a museum. The truth of that history can only be taught where that statue was. Or that monument lies. And as far as I'm concerned, I would rather you know, I want plaques on them where they are in the context of where they are. And therefore, in a museum, we can teach— we can say what we like in a museum. However, I would like people to be told the truth about the history, not in a museum, but in schools and in the public, so that in fact, people have an opportunity to learn something about their history. They may not go to university or they may not have been taught it at school, they may have missed it. But they can stand and

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look at it and say this guy was involved in the enslavement of Black people. And that might just change their attitude for the better. So, to me museums have their place but the truth must be known outside the museum or else it is pointless.

Tom Crowley 1:11:33

That's very valuable. You know, no one's actually said that.

Geoff Palmer 1:11:39

Thank you. So, I hope that you get at least you get five minutes from it.

Tom Crowley 1:11:52

The more we get the better for the archive.

Geoff Palmer 1:11:54

Yes, because you can pick out— that's what I tend to do. I say a lot about stuff. I could do that in 10 minutes. But I think a lot of people— what I found is you assume that somebody knows it, and then you then edit it. And then the person really is missing when the public watches it.

Tom Crowley 1:17:20

I have one more question if I may? Just a small one. It may not be a good question. But I was wondering, have you kind of picked up on— obviously each discussion around each monument has its own particular dynamic, but have you picked up on anything that distinguishes the debate in Scotland? I was looking at Glasgow there's obviously a sectarian element to the statue protecting versus statue protesting situation in Glasgow. But have you picked up, yeah, maybe anything in particular about Edinburgh and Scotland that is different from what's happening in the rest of the country?

Geoff Palmer 1:18:01

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No, I think that, you know, the Edinburgh - Glasgow thing is there, but Glasgow has always acknowledged that they had a link with slavery. They didn't know the detail. That's better known now, Edinburgh never acknowledged anything because it couldn't be seen that easily. They have no Merchant City in Edinburgh. So, you've got a Merchant City, Glasgow, you know there was a link. But Edinburgh had no such thing. But then we looked very carefully at the New Town. And we could see that the New Town is on the compensation list, slavery compensation. A lot of people who lived there got slavery compensation and probably more significant than Glasgow.

We also look at, you know, the schools. And we have, not say in Edinburgh, but we have Bathgate Academy which is slave owner's money. We've got Dollar Academy that's built with slave owner's money, Inverness Academy. We also have, you know, schools like Gillespie School in Edinburgh. That has a link and we've got street names you know, and we've got statues linked with slavery. And we've got the Gladstone just down in Leith where he got the biggest slave compensation money John Gladstone, 83 million in today's money and Leith could be said to be part of Edinburgh.

But the main thing is Glasgow University's response. And I was involved in that. And they did the research, produced a report and said they received about 200 million and that they're going to set up a reparative programme with the University of the West Indies and local scholarships, and they've done that. And they've renamed a new building. I think it's the James McCune Smith building, the first black medical student probably in the Western world, did his medicine there. So again, here we have an institution acting with I would call a first light. You acknowledge this historical link and then endeavouring to do something about the consequences. And I was there at the launch. And they had a Jamaican flag flying over the University. They had the Vice Chancellor, I think of University of the West Indies. He was there. It could be Chancellor, so I'm not sure which one it is. And, you know, they asked me, and I was very pleased to attend. And I was even more pleased when the Principal used that phrase that I use, you know, which is, he acknowledged that it is something which I'd used, we cannot change the past, but we can change the consequences of the past. And they had a plaque. And the plaque says this is dedicated to those who suffered this terrible slavery. And that's on the plaque which students and everybody, forever will read. And that's a University, which has been in existence before Columbus went to the New World. So, to me, that is so important.

And of course, you know, say finally, I've been involved in the Rule Britannia thing, you know, people rang me up about that. And that is important, because that's like a statue. It is should you get rid of it? And my view again: no, it is part of our history. It has a context. And when you read the words it is saying hypocritically, you know, we will never, never be slaves, while we were enslavers of other people. And that is part of the hypocrisy of this slavery where people were saying, Black people -like Dundas-, you know, were suited for the for slavery because they can take the sun, that sort of teleology. They can take the sun, therefore they should be there. Thus, we can sing a song, we will never, never be slaves because basically, you know, we can't take the sun. Nobody's got the power to put us there. And to me, that song, what I said in one of the newspapers, is they should have that song printed at the Proms. And below it, they should have a narrative which would say this song is about the enslaving of millions of people who had a lifespan of less than 10 years. And that it made us all this money and as left the Caribbean in the present economic state it's in. And that should be below it. And my

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attitude is that a lot of people might not sing it. But that will be their decision, not the government's. And I think to me, it's the same as statues and what I fear is that if you start doing that, then we'll have to ban Amazing Grace because it's written by a slaver, who was a slaver. So, if we start tinkering we end up with a dilemmas like that, because who would want to ban Amazing Grace? That's what we should be thinking. When we start thinking of taking stuff down.

Tom Crowley 1:25:36

Is there anything you want to add for the record?

Geoff Palmer 1:25:39

I just think for the record, you know, again, we talked about statues about moving statues. I think, as I said, you know, the next statue down should be racism. I don't want another one taken down until we've taken down racism and I also want people to realise that the Black people, especially those from the Caribbean, and Africa were part of this history. And that Windrush is part of this history. And that— Black children attacking each other is part of this history. Police attacking Black people is part of this history. Poor representation is part of this history.

And I said earlier, I was going to tell two little stories about myself and I'd forgotten and to talk about representation. And I know for example, in the hospitals in Edinburgh and the Lothians, we didn't have a significant Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic representation. And, you know, a programme was set up to teach about it. It's a phrase I use in my little book up there. It's called system consciousness. And I think this is what we had to teach that course. You know, the people who are doing the interviews and pick the interviewees, they both should know about system consciousness. And it's about understanding and knowing the expectations of the society you live in. Both sides should know this. And therefore, that course was done, and we went from something like four senior managers to 28. Significant change, and that's education, but education that was appropriate to the situation. So, it wasn't genetic. It's like when we look at COVID, we thought it was genetics. Some people did, wrongly. And it's clearly related to social conditions. So, if we don't know what we're addressing, we're never going to do it. So, we need to have that sort of expertise. And what bothers me is, you know, if we don't have this representation, then people's attitudes remain the same.

When I went to give a lecture at the Edinburgh Festival last year, I arrived, and the attendant said, can I help? And I said, yeah, I said that I've come to give a lecture at two o'clock. And she said, two o'clock, well you can't be giving a lecture at two o'clock because that lecture is being given by Professor Sr Geoff Palmer. That's where we are still, this is a combination of my story. What I've said happened last year.

And following that, just a couple of weeks or whatever, later, quite near to that. I went to one of our most significant institutions. I won't call it a name. Everybody keeps asking me what it was, but I went, and I had a problem with the phone,

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Position:	Public Figure		

it needed charging, so I thought I had to make an important phone call. So, I said to the porter, I said, could I go into the reception and just ask them if they could charge this phone for me because I need to make a call. And he said, do you know anybody in there? And I say, yeah, I used to know the previous boss and the present boss, I know him to some degree. And he said the previous boss, you knew him well? I said yeah, he said, well, were you his chauffeur? So, you know, what we have in the frame of mind of the ordinary people working out there. They still see Black people in that manner and it's because of lack of representation.

You know, so, this is, I hope, programmes like this or whatever. It will help to change attitudes. You know David Hume. People say oh, why blame him? But it was he who articulated it, where he said, you know, in his view, Black people are inferior to White people and then Kant picked it up and turned it into race, this difference. And then we, you know, no matter what sort of menial job you've got, you're aware of that. It's through our system, it's not something which people know about. The policeman believes that to kill Floyd. You know, the policemen who shot Blake, I think I'm not sure if that's the surname. But the young man who just got shot. The policeman thought that. So, you know, we've got to be very much aware that we need a hell of a lot of education still. So, it's not somebody calling me a brewer. Only, but it's part of it. It's saying that, you know, they're repeating Hume, you know, and we've just got to change that. And as I said, what you're doing is a part of it. And it's needed.

[recording resumes]

Geoff Palmer 0:00

Two little boys saw me. And as soon as I was passing I heard one of the boys, the younger one said, there's a nigger, and his brother or his whatever it smacked him on the head and said, it's rude to point. Now, to me that— I told that story to the police and everybody 10 years ago when it happened. And it's a very powerful education story. Because what this is saying? It's saying they were taught not to point at an adult. Not to point at an adult. It's rude. They were not taught not to say the word nigger or what it means.

And that's the subtlety of our education. And I smiled when that happened because they were taught not to point at an adult. They weren't taught not to point at a Black adult or a White adult. So, they recognise me as an adult. But they also recognise me as a nigger in terms of what they've been taught. And thus, that's where we need— we can't assume anything about children. Because they learn from us, they hear— culture is passed on. And every generation we have to educate. It's not like genes for our body form. We inherit that, it's passed on. We have a nose, two eyes if we're fortunate. We have a mouth, two arms, two legs. That's genetics. But our cultural attitudes aren't inherited. So, we've got to teach that every time. I haven't even thought of that before.

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Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

Date of transcription: 30-10-2020

Participant permissions to record given



Participant permission to archive given



The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



Interview Date:	01-09-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Geoff Palmer	Organisation:	N/A
Position:	Public Figure		

Tom Crowley 2:27

I started recording again for that.

Geoff Palmer 2:29

You're recording?

Tom Crowley 2:34

I'd stopped recording when I started talking, but I've started again.

Geoff Palmer 2:37

No, no, because that's something you know, I've thought of it, but I've not thought of the genetics before. Hmm. That we inherit our eyes, nose, two ears and two arms and stuff that's within our genes. So, we pass that on. But what we don't pass on is our goodness or our badness. We learn that every time.

Tom Crowley 3:07

There's also a sense that people are inherently racist, that racism is a kind of given. You know, obviously there's a sense, even if you think it's very bad, we still have a sense that it's inevitable. But where I do my research in northwest Pakistan people are really mixed right? Some people are like me some people are much darker it's one of those parts of the world where people look really mixed. And it has no meaning there. It's quite flat society so you know— colour varies within families even, it's just, I guess, how the cookie crumbles in terms of, I don't know, the melanin people's skin or whatever. So, it has no meaning. Whereas in the UK, those different— that kind of range of how people would look does have meaning. It's a kind of wonderful thing to go somewhere where you realise that that has no meaning. That is not a kind of given that people will, yeah, discriminate or judge based on someone's appearance.

Geoff Palmer 4:19

This is the why I make that statement, that we pass on our genetics, our body form, and all that. But every generation has to get this cultural, whatever, and in our culture, we have this racism we have this prejudice. We have got the same result.

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We start picking up from when you start hearing your parents speak. You know, your parents start saying things. And you're picking that up all the time. Their attitude to the neighbour, to whatever, to your body language, you're picking that up all the time. And that that's where we get it from.

You know, and somehow now we just can't reverse it. Over thousands of years, we picked up all these cultural nuances and attitudes and facial expressions, body language. You know, if we're looking at our face all the time, you can tell from somebody's face what they're thinking. And how do you change that? You know, so, we are a product, a consequence of the past. We can't change it.

I spoke at the Black Lives Matter thing and I said, you know what is important, with Black people or race, what I want you to do is when you hear somebody start speaking in a racist manner don't accept it or tolerate it. If you can promise me that then you'll make a significant change, because what happens when we go somewhere and— an interview panel you know, I've been around a long time so I know that people on an interview panel, they will discriminate and everybody knows it's happening. And nobody says anything. Because you're part of that gang. It's like what I call all those academics who attacked me. I call them an academic razor gang. You see what I mean? It's no different from anywhere else where I've lived in deprived areas, it's exactly the same. It's people who have got different views and different opinions, but they've taken the lead from certain people within that gang and gang behaviour is like that. You're following one or two people. And I think that's very sad. So, you know at the Black Lives Matter event, that's what I said. You can do something. Just do that. I know you might lose your job. If you did that at an interview, were to call your colleagues racist for making that decision.

I had a very famous interview which you've heard off, everybody sees it. And it's in BBC Life Scientific, which I did some time ago. And I was asked, you know, and I said about my life, and I said in 1964. In 1964, I had an interview with a very famous politician. And he said to me, when I walked into the room, I should go home and grow bananas. 1964. And I said to him, it's difficult to grow bananas in Haringay. Didn't get the position, but at least I felt better. But that was telling him something about my sense of belonging. I'm here forever. Therefore, it's no point saying that to me anymore. And that's what I tell young people when I talk, it's about a sense of belonging. That's what the racists go for. They go for your sense of belonging. And I say don't let them.

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