
Australia's deep connection with enslavement

By Georgina Arnott
June 16, 2020

What is sometimes forgotten in discussions of slavery in the British Empire is that the British Parliament paid out £20 million in restitution after it finally abolished slavery in 1833. That is around £300 billion (\$546 billion) in today's money, and it represented about 40 per cent of treasury's annual income. Before the GFC bank bailouts, it was Britain's largest transfer of public wealth into private hands.

It shows what can be done. People harmed in the name of private enterprise can be compensated on a large scale, and economies are not crippled. In fact, like the GFC bailouts, the £20 million had a stimulatory effect, turbo-charging a range of capital works in the private sector, such as railways.

The shocking thing is that this compensation payment did not go to those enslaved by almost four centuries of British involvement in the labyrinthine slave business. It went to slave-owners – for the loss of their "property".

The history of slave-ownership in Britain and its colonies is not something you learnt in school and have since forgotten. In 2014 researchers at University College London created an online data base of slave-owners that prompted historians of Britain's former colonies, myself included, to follow the tendrils of slave-ownership throughout the Empire.

Those compensated were a diverse group that included Dutch farmers in South Africa, widowed mothers in Birmingham who had invested in one slave, and the creole residents of the Caribbean. Slavery business permeated middle and upper Britain and its empire.



The Adam Lindsay Gordon statue in Spring Street, Melbourne

But since compensation was allocated according to people "owned" and plantation profitability, wealthy investors received a disproportionately large share of the £20 million. John Gladstone, father to British prime minister William Gladstone, was part of a compensation claim for 11 plantations, just one of which saw him paid more than £10,000 for the loss of 193 enslaved people.

This story has implications for Australia. Compensation was paid to at least 150 families who settled in the Australian colonies. These included high-profile figures, such as judges, religious ministers, governors, journalists, pastoralists, financiers, commercial agents and writers. These settlers were typically born in a plantation colony to families that had accrued wealth, education and social advancement through the enslavement of people.

Poet Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-70), a father of the Australian ballad, was an only child of slave-owners in British Guiana. His colonial life as a member of the Victorian House of Assembly, land speculator, horse breaker and poet was underwritten by large sums of money from his mother (including a £7000 inheritance) after she received compensation for 285 enslaved people.

Victorian Supreme Court judge Sir Edward Williams (1813-80) was the son of a planter and himself part of two successful claims for compensation for 64 enslaved people in Trinidad in 1836, amounting to more than £3000. In 1842 he arrived in the Port Phillip District, commenced a legal career and purchased land extending from the Yarra River to Toorak Road to build Como House.



Como House, which was constructed in 1847.

A particularly interesting case is that of Charles Sievwright (1800-55), assistant to chief protector of Aborigines in Port Phillip, George Augustus Robertson, who was dismissed after tending yet another report on the murder of Wadawurrung and Dja Dja Wurrung by squatters. Sievwright's father was one of several awardees of compensation for 86 enslaved people in Tobago the year before Charles came to Australia.

Other prominent Victorian figures include Andrew (1792-1853) and Celia Scott (1796-1879) who in 1836 were awardees of compensation for 107 enslaved people in Tobago. Three years later, they established Mount Buninyoning station and began purchasing land in the western district of Port Phillip, where they ran a cattle farm over 6470 hectares.

Melbourne lord mayor and member of the Victorian Legislative Assembly Godfrey Carter (1830-1902) was born in Jamaica where several members of his family owned slaves and were awarded compensation for their loss.

Newspaper journalists, including from this newspaper, came from slave-owning families too. Chairman of the Melbourne stock exchange and *Age* journalist Robert Wallen (1831-93), editor of *Victoria Colonist* and *Western District Advertiser* Gilbert Robertson (1794-1851), and editor of *The Age* from 1872 Arthur Windsor (1833-1913) were all sons of slave-owners. Windsor's father was awarded compensation for 30 enslaved people in Barbados and Windsor himself received money from inherited sugar estates.

The point of identifying individuals is not to demonise them. Rather, this helps us trace the legacies of slavery across the British Empire, including to Victoria, and establish how they manifested. Slavery was premised on a notion of racial hierarchy that was influential here too. How these notions informed the activities of those who were raised in slave-owning environments is the subject of ongoing research.

Compensation and wealth from slavery also made its way to Australia via investment schemes. Australia received more British foreign investment in the second half of the 19th century than any other place. So although it is difficult to say how much wealth from slavery supported the expansion and development of the Australian colonies, logic suggests it was considerable.

The Prime Minister is right to say that New South Wales was established at a time when there was rising anti-slavery sentiment in Britain. A number of earlier colonists hoped to establish a society free from the conflicts of Europe and the moral failures of enslavement. However, this clearly did not happen. One of the reasons for this is that the British imported a history of racial oppression via legal, administrative, economic and ideological structures.

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It is significant that the Prime Minister says there are "issues" in Australian history and that he is "heavily invested" in them. We all are. Determining how they have shaped Australia today, and what form restitution might take, is the challenge.

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