

8 July 2022

Dear Committee Members,

I would urge you to reconsider the matter of renaming Dundas Street in the wake of mounting criticism of the notion that Dundas was personally responsible for sending over 600,000 Africans into slavery. It is correct to say that Dundas *moved* a motion for gradual not immediate abolition in early April 1792, a motion that was passed by a substantial majority of parliamentary MPs. It is incorrect to infer from this that Dundas was responsible for the continuation of the slave trade until 1807. To begin with, Dundas' subsequent speeches on his proposal envisaged a terminal date of 1800, which was amended by the Commons to 1796. Second, and equally important, both the Lords and the monarch opposed any bill for immediate abolition. This opposition is well documented. The Lords objected to being dictated to, and in 1792, its opinion mattered, unlike today. In fact, in the Lords' debate on abolition, the Duke of Clarence, George III's third son, the future William III, made a maiden speech in favour of the slave trade. He then rallied to Captain John Kimber, the first slave captain to be accused of murdering an African on the Middle Passage.

Another problem zoning in on Dundas is context, crucial to any historical inquiry. When immediate abolition was moved in April 1792, France was moving into the radical phase of its revolution and war with Britain was imminent. At the same time, a slave rebellion had broken out in Saint Domingue [the future Haiti] but a day's sailing from Britain's principal sugar island, Jamaica. The volatility of the international situation demanded caution in the eyes of the majority of British MPs, and this is what Dundas' motion provided. The likelihood of a smooth transition to a self-generating slave system, which is what was proposed by Wilberforce [ie. Abolition, the ending of the slave trade,



NOT Emancipation, the ending of slavery], was problematic. The demography of the islands militated against it; so, too, was the likelihood that Britain could police the ban of the slave trade and prevent other nations capitalizing on the ban. At the time Jamaica was a slave entrepot, with roughly a third of all Africans imported there being sent elsewhere. Dundas tried to strike a middle ground between the abolition idealists and the slave traders; tilted towards the abolitionists in that abolition was recognized as a principle to be adopted and that slavery should come soon after. It is quite erroneous to suggest that Dundas was a rampant racist by the standards of the day. As Lord Advocate, he had played a major part in banning of slavery in Scotland [Knight v Wedderburn, 1778]; this was a more capacious ban than the better-known Somerset case [1772] in England. In 1792, Dundas served notice on the slave merchants and planters that their time was almost up. The wrinkle in his proposals was that he believed that the slave trade and ultimately slavery could only be eliminated with the assent of the colonial assemblies, a proposition that some thought opened the door to interminable delay. Dundas was, however, a politician who wished to recover and consolidate the imperial system after American independence, and it was the colonial assemblies that had played a leading role in fashioning American resistance. He saw the abolition of the slave trade within the context of the first break-up on the British empire. He was pre-eminently a metropolitan politician interested in safeguarding Britain's emergent position as a world power, and that meant building on Canada's loyalist tradition. His position on slavery was similar to that of Upper Canada's first lieutenant governor, John Simcoe.

No reputable historian of abolition, whatever their political leanings, ignores the very complicated context that led to the delay in the abolition of the slave trade until 1807. This includes David Olusoga, the popular historian who has recently done much to promote diversity and Britain's black heritage on TV. In fact, it is worth stressing that despite the huge petitioning campaign in favour of abolition in 1792, which solicited probably half a million signatures, the abolition movement seriously fractured in the wake of the French Revolution and was temporarily defunct by 1796. The moment when the moral force of public opinion informed the abolition campaign was fleeting and unstable; in practical terms, the possibility of full abolition in 1792 was untenable given the nature of Britain's political oligarchy at the time.

The City of Toronto's research on Dundas and the slave trade did not meet professional standards of inquiry. No primary sources were seriously addressed. The perspective was narrow, focusing only on Dundas, not on the context in which he moved for gradual abolition. There was not even a close reading of the very accessible parliamentary debates on the issue. The committee's research team cherry-picked a few secondary sources which seemed to vindicate Dundas' responsibility; one of which, Stephen Mullen's article in the *Scottish Historical Review*, has already been soundly discredited. It did not address the many authorities that disputed Dundas' role as the central reason why abolition was delayed. It prevaricated when Sir Tom Devine, Scotland's leading historian, offered evidence that did not square with the research committee's presuppositions. The letter Devine received from the mayor's office revealed that the city establishment was not seriously interested in an historical debate on Dundas' role. It had already made up its mind. As for local consultation, historians in

Toronto who had or were about to write on the issue were by-passed. This included Padraic Scanlan of the University of Toronto [*Freedom's Debtors; Slave Empire*] and me [*Murder on the Middle Passage*], despite the fact that our work has been commended for pushing the boundaries of British and abolitionist history in an era of Churchillian puffery and Brexit. The so-called peer-adjudicated research financed by the City of Toronto was shabby, incomplete and suspiciously parti pris.

Perhaps the committee should consider whether it really wants to pursue this project at a cost of \$6 million and more as prices rise and the cost of living for Toronto's poor will be dire. What is to be gained by eliminating Dundas' name when Mississauga has chosen to retain it? In fact, the name Dundas had lost all political resonance with Torontonians until a cop-cat petition based on the Edinburgh controversy over the Melville monument dredged it up. The City of Toronto is doing its citizens a disservice by propounding phoney wokery.

Had I been in Toronto on 12 July, I would have requested a chance to convey my views directly, but I am in Europe until the Thirteenth.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Nicholas Rogers". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

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