

June 18, 2024

Jennifer Dundas
Chairperson,
Henry Dundas Committee of Ontario

Mayor Olivia Chow, Councillors
Toronto City Council
Toronto, Ontario

Dear Mayor Chow and councillors,

I am writing to encourage you to abandon your adherence to the inaccurate set of facts on which the city decided to rename Yonge-Dundas Square, regardless of whether you move ahead with renaming. I also wish to respond to attacks on the research of our committee found in Dr. Melanie Newton's written submission to this committee, which include hateful accusations against members of the Dundas family and me in particular.

The city's inaccurate set of facts about Henry Dundas

As the city develops its public communications strategy for Sankofa Square, it has an opportunity to raise the level of civil discourse about Canada's history. Since city staff first unveiled their initial research on Henry Dundas in 2020, eminent historians from around the world have weighed in, and contributed to a vibrant debate about the politics of abolition. Their research has made it clear that city staff made significant errors in their historical research.

The constructive thing to do, now, would be to acknowledge this growing body of scholarship, show a bit of humility, and stop blaming Henry Dundas for things he didn't do. It is time for Toronto to recognize that city staff, in their zeal to pursue a policy of decolonizing the city, were overly-enthusiastic about finding Henry Dundas guilty of the accusations against him in the petition presented to Council in July 2020. The result was an unbalanced and inaccurate account of his legacy.

Our request therefore, is that your future references to Henry Dundas accurately reflect the historical record, as verified by numerous eminent historians. This record shows that Dundas tried to chart a path to abolition by introducing a plan to end slavery and the slave trade together, but that he was thwarted by powerful economic interests, the opposition of the King, opposition in the House of Lords, and the outbreak of war with France.

Responding to Dr. Newton's criticism

A further reason for writing is that I learned this evening that Dr. Melanie Newton submitted a letter to you that includes personal and hateful attacks against members of the Henry Dundas Committee of Ontario, and me in particular, with explicit accusations of racism that cannot remain unaddressed. Although she does not name us, she has made it is obvious that we, and I, are her intended target.

Dr. Newton's repeated accusations of racist motives affect virtually everything she wrote about us. Her inaccurate and unfair statements are too numerous to dissect individually, so a few examples will have to suffice.

Dr. Newton suggested that the Dundas family should follow the example of the Trevalyan family in Britain, who have issued personal apologies and made reparations as a result of their ancestors' ownership of slaves on six plantations. This ugly imputation – that the Dundas family has slave-related history that we should apologize for – is false and defamatory. Dr. Newton should know this, since she attended the TTC board meeting where two members of our family refuted similar accusations from Councillor Moise, who also demanded an apology from the Dundas family. The truth is that our ancestors in Scotland never owned slaves, never invested in slave-related ventures, and adhered to the anti-slavery position of their Presbyterian Church. In Canada, they founded an anti-slavery Wesleyan Methodist church near Ingersoll, Ontario, in the mid-1800s, and were part of a welcoming community connected to the Underground Railroad that actively helped freedom seekers who sought refuge in Canada from slavery in the US.

Dr. Newton obviously made no effort to learn about the anti-slavery history of the Dundas family, and as a result made obscenely inaccurate assumptions about our family.

Dr. Newton also took offence to the fact that I have lodged complaints against historians who have starkly misrepresented the historical record, including her. She characterizes this as harassment. I make no apology for this. I did indeed file a complaint about Dr. Newton's research and public statements with the Research Integrity Office at the University of Toronto, although I refrained from making that action public, and only acknowledge it now because she has cited this to support her claims of purported harassment. You should know that while the officer who considered my complaint to the U of T declined to make a finding of research misconduct, she did not find that the basis of my complaint was inaccurate. In the two other instances where I filed complaints against historians, including a complaint against the city historian assigned to the Dundas Street renaming project, in both cases I succeeded in obtaining public apologies. Clearly my complaints had merit.

Dr. Newton also said we have "wrongly claimed that Henry Dundas was responsible for the abolition of slavery in Canada." That's an absurd representation of our research. We pointed out that Dundas appointed an avowed abolitionist, John Graves Simcoe, to be Upper Canada's first lieutenant-governor, and that Simcoe went on to oversee passage of the first anti-slavery legislation anywhere in the British Empire. That is a provable fact. Governments act through their appointed officials. This is not controversial. It's difficult to see how she could have failed to understand our point.

Dr. Newton also grossly misrepresented our analysis concerning Henry Dundas's position on the use of slaves in the military. She falsely stated that we viewed Dundas's position on the use of Black soldiers in the military as evidence of his abolitionist sentiment. This is ludicrous. What we pointed out is that Dundas opposed the use of Black slaves as soldiers, but was overruled by cabinet.

Dr. Newton refuses to acknowledge the important contributions of eminent historians from around the world who disagree with her version of history, and whose views are consistent with our committee's research. It is particularly concerning that she ignores the peer-reviewed articles of Professor Angela McCarthy, who unearthed new evidence that Henry Dundas was an abolitionist. Dr. Newton's refusal even to refer to the work of Professor McCarthy and other historians work should tell you everything you need to know about how willing she is to confront important and authoritative research that contradicts her opinions.

Dr. Newton has accused me and my family of holding "a determined commitment to self-interested ignorance." In fact, it is she who has acted out of ignorance. I therefore encourage you to reject Dr. Newton's version of history as being the definitive statement on Henry Dundas. Her careless misrepresentation of the historical record, and her suggestion that the Dundas family should apologize for acts that occurred only her imagination, have exposed her as someone whose views cannot be considered reliable.

I urge you, therefore, to show some humility, and seriously consider the possibility that your staff got the facts about Henry Dundas wrong. I urge you to move forward in a way that recognizes the complexities of the historical record, and to recognize, as well, that simplistic, reductive attacks on historical figures and their families, as in this case, divide our communities and degrade public discourse.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in purple ink, appearing to read "J Dundas", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jennifer Dundas
Chairperson, Henry Dundas Committee of Ontario