

## Recognition Review – Historical Research on the Life and Legacy of Henry Dundas

Updated May 31, 2021

City of Toronto staff have reviewed published peer-reviewed academic research prepared by professional historians on Henry Dundas to understand his legacy and how it may impact Black and Indigenous communities in Toronto. This document includes an overview of findings.

Staff have also consulted with more than 20 academic experts knowledgeable in the areas of public history, Black Canadian studies, and public commemoration to inform this report's recommendations and the Recognition Review project as a whole. As an educational resource for the public, staff have partnered with the Toronto Public Library to publish a reading list on Henry Dundas' life and legacy, the history of Dundas Street, and the contemporary Black experience in Canada. This reading list is available on the City's [Recognition Review web page](#).

Henry Dundas has long been viewed as a controversial figure in the history of the abolition movement. In 1776, Dundas, as Lord Advocate, was one of the lawyers who represented Joseph Knight, an enslaved man who had been purchased by John Wedderburn in Jamaica in 1765. In 1768, Wedderburn returned to Scotland, taking Knight with him. In Scotland, Knight asserted his freedom based on an earlier English case, *Somerset v. Stewart*. *Knight v. Wedderburn* was settled in 1778, and Dundas has been credited for helping to affirm the principle that slavery did not exist under Scottish law, and that any formerly enslaved people living in Scotland could claim their freedom.<sup>1</sup>

In 1792, independent Member of Parliament William Wilberforce brought a bill before the British House of Commons to immediately abolish the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. This proposal followed growing support for abolition among the British public, with a then-record 500 petitions being submitted to the House in support of Wilberforce's bill.<sup>2</sup> During the parliamentary debate, Dundas proposed an amendment qualifying support for the bill by adding the word "gradually", so that it read that the slave trade "ought gradually to be abolished". In his speech to parliament, Dundas explained that while he had "long entertained the same opinion ... as to the abolition of the slave trade", he "must consider how far it may be proper for [him] to give [his] assent" to the bill. He went on to describe how "this trade must ultimately be abolished, but by moderate measures

---

<sup>1</sup> Cairns, John, "After Somerset: The Scottish Experience", in *The Journal of Legal History*, Volume 33.3 (2012), p. 291-312.

<sup>2</sup> Page, Anthony, "Rational Dissent, Enlightenment, and the Abolition of the British Slave Trade", in *The Historical Journal*, Volume 54.3 (2011), p. 754-755.

which shall not invade the property of individuals, nor shock too suddenly the prejudices of our West India Islands".<sup>3</sup>

In moving this amendment, Dundas set out a middle-ground proposal that voiced moderate support for abolition, while also acknowledging the arguments of opponents of the bill, who saw the continuation of the slave trade as essential to the economy of the British West Indies. Dundas' intentions for doing so have been subject to debate. Biographer Michael Fry, for example, has interpreted the amendment as a compromise solution that allowed the bill to pass in the House of Commons, laying the groundwork for eventual abolition<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, peer-reviewed academic research offers different interpretations of his actions. Scottish historian Dr. Glen Doris suggests that Dundas' amendment was motivated by "fear of radical change".<sup>5</sup> Dr. Iain Whyte described how Dundas' amendment "effectively delayed abolition for nearly two decades".<sup>6</sup>

Dundas' actions following the 1792 parliamentary debate show a clear opposition to abolition. Wilberforce continued to present an abolition bill every year until 1799 – but as Glen Doris argues, Dundas "worked hard to defeat subsequent bills".<sup>7</sup> He points to a communication between Dundas and Wilberforce in 1794 in which Dundas stated that he had "used all the influence he possessed to prevent the abolition question being raised at any rate while the nation was at war," in reference to Britain's wars with France (1793-1815).<sup>8</sup> The work of historian Roger Buckley shows that from 1795 until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the British government sought to enhance its army's military capability by purchasing approximately 13,400 slaves to serve in the West India Regiments.<sup>9</sup> As Secretary of War, Dundas was a key architect behind this policy, which made the British Government the largest individual purchaser of slaves during this period. In a paper titled "Henry Dundas: a 'Great Delayer' of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade," Dr. Stephen Mullen expands on this work, arguing that Dundas' opposition to abolition after 1792 was grounded in his interest in preserving both the economy of the British West Indies as well as British military capabilities, describing how Dundas "designed a gradual abolition to suit the needs of enslavers and

---

<sup>3</sup> From *The Debate on a Motion for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade: in the House of Commons, on Monday the Second of April, 1792, Reported in Detail*. London, 1792. Accessed online at <https://archive.org/details/debateonamotion01commgoog>.

<sup>4</sup> Fry, Michael. *The Dundas Despotism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, (2004 edition), p. 200. Originally published in 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Doris, Glen, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Politics of Abolition*, PhD Thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Whyte, Iain. *Scotland and the Abolition of Black Slavery, 1756-1838*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, (2006), p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Doris, Glen, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Politics of Abolition*, p. 178.

<sup>8</sup> Doris, *ibid*, p. 178.

<sup>9</sup> Buckley, Roger N. 2008. "The British Army's African Recruitment Policy, 1790-1807". *Contributions in Black Studies: A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* Volume 5, Article 2 (<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol5/iss1/2> )

the British state".<sup>10</sup> In a recent interview with the *Scottish Herald*, Dr. Mullen concludes that scholarship by historians of slavery and abolition is "unequivocal that Henry Dundas played an instrumental role in delaying abolition for vested interests after 1792".<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the motivation behind his amendment may have been, the consequences of Dundas' actions are clear. Whether he is viewed cynically or as a pragmatist, his actions and those of the British government he served contributed to the perpetuation of the enslavement of human beings. Though Dundas' amendment was adopted and a date for abolition was proposed for 1796, the bill was never enacted by the House of Lords. It would be 1807 before the Slave Trade Act was finally passed. During this time, more than half a million Africans were enslaved and trafficked across the Atlantic, many to British colonies.

---

<sup>10</sup> Mullen, Stephen. (2021). "Henry Dundas: A 'Great Delayer' of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade", *Scottish Historical Review* (Accepted for Publication). Accessed online at <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/240875/>.

<sup>11</sup> Leask, David. "Dundas 'key' to Britain's slave army, investigation finds." *The Herald*. March 29, 2021. Accessed online at <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/19194356.dundas-key-britains-slave-army-investigation-finds/>.