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Whose Heritage? Slavery, Country Houses, and the “Culture Wars” in England

1 Introduction

In their illustrated two volume work *The Stately Homes of England* (1870), Llewellynn Frederick William Jewitt and Samuel Carter Hall captured something of the ways that the country house has been conceptualised as a key component of English culture and identity. They opined

ENGLAND is rich – immeasurably richer than any other country under the sun – in its ‘Homes’; and these homes, whether of the sovereign or of the high nobility, of the country squire or the merchant-prince, of the artisan or the labourer, whether, in fact, they are palace or cottage, or of any intermediate grade, have a character possessed by none other. England, whose ‘Home! sweet home!’ has become almost a national anthem – so closely is its sentiment entwined around the hearts of the people of every class – is, indeed, emphatically a Kingdom of Homes; and these, and their associations and surroundings, and the love which is felt for them, are its main source of true greatness. An Englishman feels, wherever he may be, that ‘Home is home, however lowly’; and that, despite the attractions of other countries and the glare and brilliancy of foreign courts and foreign phases of society, after all ‘There’s no place like home’ in his own old fatherland.¹

Jewitt and Hall defined Englishness in relation to domesticity, patriarchy, class and against the tawdry ostentation of the “foreign.” The empire figured in this construction as a space against which to define the self; in which the longing for home was intensified, and the supremacy of the nation was confirmed. The authors went on to remark that the country house functioned as “a perpetual reminder of a glorious past – its associations being closely allied with the leading heroes and worthies of our country.” Published in the mid-Victorian period, there is something familiar in authors’ notion that these buildings function as monuments to former triumphs, to better times. In his requiem to a lost England, the conservative traditionalist Roger Scruton described country houses as “memorials to the force that maintained English society [. . .]. They are the last signs of what England was like.”² As Ryan Timms has noted “Invoking heritage manifests dissatisfaction with the present and the active selection of a particular past as counterbalance.”³ In this configuration heritage be-

1 Llewellynn Frederick William Jewitt and S.C. Hall, *The Stately Homes of England*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1870): 1.

2 Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London: Continuum, 2006): 240.

3 Ryan Timms, *Heritage and the Legacies of the Past in Contemporary Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2018): viii.

comes bound up with longing for an imagined past, an articulation of Svetlana Boym's notion of "restorative nostalgia." Boym argued that

restorative nostalgia stresses *nóstos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home [. . .] Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition [. . .] restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one's homeland with paranoid determination.⁴

The veneration of the country estate as emblematic of an idealised national order relies on the erasure of the historic social, political and imperial tensions which were part of the making of these power houses. As country house society declined in the early twentieth century, many of these buildings were transformed from family homes into national heritage sites cared for by organisations set up to conserve them including the National Trust (hereafter the Trust) and English Heritage. No longer the private demesne of the elite – a symbol of their individual wealth and influence – instead the country house was remade as a signifier of national greatness. The home and the family stood in for the country and the nation; a sanitised microcosm of the social, cultural, economic and political relations of a deeply hierarchical society structured through class, gender, and race.

From its inception in the late-nineteenth century the Trust has become a mainstay of both middle England and the international tourism industry. With the enduring popularity of the Victorian novel and high society period drama, most notably *Downton Abbey* and more recently *Bridgerton*, the country house has been marketed as a quintessentially English day out. The visitor offer incorporates a sometimes uneasy blend of education, leisure and consumption. The tearoom, redolent with the colonial histories of tea, coffee and sugar, forms an integral part of the country house experience. Considering the commercial operations of heritage houses as well as their symbolic meaning, Peter Mitchell suggested that the "English country house had re-emerged in public consciousness as not only the sacred ground on which the spirit of the nation had its purest expression, but as a fetish object for a newly aspirational way of conceiving property and interior design."⁵ This framing of the Trust has been articulated by *Daily Mail* columnist and former Editor-in-Chief of British *Vogue*, Alexandra Shulman, who wrote:

I'm no expert on the subject but suspect that many of us who love visiting National Trust properties do so in a similar way to sinking into a deep, reviving bath. We like the familiarity of the experience. We like the comforting aspect. We know what we are going to get. We'll be asked not to sit on the chairs, wonder why the four-posters are often so small, marvel at the upkeep of the

⁴ Adapted text from Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/n/nostalgia/nostalgia-svetlana-boym.html> [accessed 28.02.2023].

⁵ Peter Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia: How the British Conquered Themselves* (Manchester: Manchester University Press): 81.

gardens and – highly importantly – scour the gift shop for William Morris print notebooks, tea towels and perhaps a pretty tray. That’s the point.⁶

This understanding of the country house as comfortable and comforting, as an apolitical simulacrum upon which we might project our own fantasies, relies on the absence of history. As Ian Baucom has argued, in its transformation into fetish commodity the country house has become “a cultural artifact, a spectacular arrangement of built space, valued less for itself than for the absence or lack that it at once covers and names.”⁷ Denuded of any historical context which might disquiet the visitor, the country house is rendered a safe space in which visitors might consume the spectacle of the past without engaging meaningfully with its troubling frictions. But safe, we might ask, for whom? Shulman’s assertion about how the audience relates to the history is indicative of a set of underlying assumptions about who these heritage spaces are for. As Sumaya Kassim has written “For many people of colour, collections symbolise historic and ongoing trauma and theft. Behind every beautiful object and historically important building or monument is trauma.”⁸ Visitors bring with them their own subjective experiences and knowledge, both of which shape the meaning of these spaces and the things within them. In the context of the history of slavery, the furniture and plants on display raise very different questions and feelings for both descendent communities and those who chose to see the unsettling histories these objects represent.

The relationship between slavery and the country house is well documented. References to it in the works of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters are familiar.⁹ There is a historiography dating back to the 1940s when Eric Williams raised the issue of metropolitan consumption enabled by slave-based wealth. He wrote “Returned to England, the planters’ fondest wish was to acquire an estate, blend with the aristocracy, and remove the marks of their origin.”¹⁰ In 1995 David Hancock published *Citizens of the World*, his influential study on the eighteenth century Atlantic mercantile community. In Part III of the book *Becoming a Gentleman*, Hancock set out how these slave traders and West India merchants assimilated into elite society.¹¹ Strategies in-

6 Alexandra Shulman, “I Want a Nice Tea Towel not a Thumping Woke Lecture,” *Mail on Sunday*, 23.10.2021.

7 Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999): 165.

8 Sumaya Kassim, “The Museum will not be Decolonised,” *Media Diversified*, 17.11.2017.

9 For Austen see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993): 100–116; Gabrielle D.V. White, *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: “A Fling at the Slave Trade”* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For the Brontës see Maja-Lisa Von Sneidem, “*Wuthering Heights* and the Liverpool Slave Trade,” *English Literary History* 62, no 1 (1995): 171–96; Sue Thomas, “Christianity and the State of Slavery in *Jane Eyre*,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35, no. 1 (2007): 57–79.

10 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964): 86.

11 David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 279–382.

cluded the purchase of land and a country house, conspicuous consumption in the form of collecting, and philanthropic activity. Much work was undertaken in 2007, the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, when the Heritage Lottery Fund paid out £20 million to public history projects that explored historical links to slavery and abolition. Although most of this work was temporary, it has since been digitised via the online archive *Remembering 1807*.¹² During this period English Heritage commissioned surveys into links to slavery within the sites in its care.¹³ It also organised a landmark conference on the subject which resulted in an edited volume.¹⁴ Simon Gikandi's *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, whilst not directly focused on country houses, was an important intervention for understanding the ways that race figured in the philosophical, aesthetic and material development of eighteenth-century patterns of consumption.¹⁵ In 2014, Stephanie Barczewski published an ambitious scoping study which documented the links between imperial enrichment and country house culture over the course of three centuries.¹⁶ Between 2009–2015, historians working on the *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* project researched who the slave-owners were between 1763–1833. The project included strands of enquiry relating to both culture and the built environment.¹⁷ As of 2023 it has identified 419 individuals who invested their money in country houses and estates during the period.

This body of research has provided organisations like the Trust with an empirical basis for understanding how the properties in their care connect to the system of transatlantic slavery. Having engaged with the history of slavery in a piecemeal way during 2007, the Trust embarked on a systematic investigation in 2019 and published its findings in an Interim Report in September 2020. The Interim Report explored connections to both slavery and colonialism (most notably India), however for the purposes of this book the chapter will focus on the former. This has been done with an understanding that slavery cannot be siphoned off from the colonial project given that it was crucial to the making of the Atlantic empire. The report identified 60 properties out of 300 whose owners had ties to the slave economy through slave and plantation ownership, slave trading, profiteering from the sale of slave produced commodities and the colonial administration of slave societies. Whilst this came as little surprise to scholars of slavery,

12 <http://antislavery.ac.uk/aboutremembering1807> [accessed 28.02.2023]. See also John Oldfield and Mary Wills, "Remembering 1807: Lessons from the Archives," *History Workshop Journal* 90 (2020): 253–72.

13 <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/the-slave-trade-and-abolition/slavery-and-the-british-country-house/> [accessed 28.02.2023].

14 Andrew Hann and Madge Dresser, eds., *Slavery and the British Country House* (Swindon: English Heritage, 2013).

15 Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011).

16 Stephanie Barczewski, *Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700–1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

17 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/physical/> and <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/cultural/> [both accessed 28.02.2023].

the backlash that it generated in both the right-wing media and political sphere was notable. Released in the midst of the global Black Lives Matter protests, the reception of the report provides an insight into the racial politics of national heritage in England.¹⁸

This chapter explores the place of the country house within English national culture and how this relates to concepts of national identity. It considers how the separation of histories of slavery from that of the countryside and country houses has contributed to a racialisation of these symbolic sites as exclusively white. It analyses how the report has figured in the manufacturing of a right-wing “culture war” and what this reveals about the struggle to define the nation in a post-imperial, post-Brexit world. Using a case study of Dyrham Park, it argues that the interpretation of the relationship between slavery and the country house is not static but rather an historic and ongoing process of reconfiguration.

2 Country Houses, National Heritage, and the Politics of Race

Country house visiting has a long and venerable history in England. During the Georgian period upwardly mobile middle-class tourists journeyed around the country visiting great houses and sometimes recording their experiences in travel journals.¹⁹ These contemporary accounts provide an insight into how these spaces functioned as a display of wealth, power, and politics even before they became part of the formal “exhibitionary complex” of the heritage industry.²⁰ Stowe House in Buckinghamshire initially opened its gardens to the public in the 1740s with the house following in the 1760s. Benton Seeley, a local publisher, sold guides of the house and garden – the first of their kind to be produced.²¹ It is fascinating in the context of current debates to note that this early manifestation of country house tourism involved a property whose family had extensive connections to slavery. The house is now a private school whilst the gardens are managed by the Trust. The school has been exploring its links to the history and its website noted that “Among the Stowe Papers is a 1715 bill of sale for 272 enslaved people and ivory purchased in Guinea and sold in Jamaica, which

¹⁸ Reactions to the report differed in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In Scotland the National Trust for Scotland published its own Interim Report on 17 December 2021. The report identified 48 properties with links to slavery categorised as direct, indirect, intergenerational and abolitionist. The full report can be accessed here: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/ws-nts/Production/assets/downloads/Interim-report-on-known-slavery-links-at-NTS-properties-Dec-2021.pdf?mtime=20211217082015> [accessed 28.02.2023].

¹⁹ Richard Wilson and Alan Mackley, *Creating Paradise: The Building of the English Country House, 1660–1880* (London: Hambledon and London, 2000): 56.

²⁰ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations* 4 (1988): 73–102.

²¹ <http://www.bath.ac.uk/library/cabinet-of-curiosities/story/23> [accessed 28.02.2023].

may be linked to Richard Temple, 1st Viscount Cobham (1675–1749).²² More concrete connections have been evidenced by Hannah Young who has explored the life of Anna Eliza Elletson (1737–1813), the Duchess of Chandos, a plantation owner in Jamaica and mistress of Stowe.²³ Mark Rothery has explored the fascination with these spaces for historic visitors arguing that “Country houses were ‘power houses’, emanating authority and influence.”²⁴ They afforded their audiences a glimpse of “the glittering prizes of wealth, objects evoking foreign worlds. Rare and untouchable commodities were these to the Georgians, but so too are they now, ‘national treasures’ speaking of Britain’s history.”

Country house visiting transformed from a private family-controlled pastime allowing access to a select discerning audience with the development of the Trust. A concern about the detrimental effects of industrialisation on people and place was one of the motivating factors for establishing the Trust in 1895. Social reformer and founder Octavia Hill, placed great value on access to green spaces for the working classes whose ability to connect with nature had been corroded through migration into the urban sprawl of Victorian cities. The countryside needed to be protected and preserved from industrial capitalism and this underlying principle helped to establish “heritage as a ‘class’ of ‘place’ which should be set apart from the everyday.”²⁵ Heritage was to be understood as a form of leisure and escapism from the toil and squalor of modern life – a retreat into the pastoral idyll of the imagined past. Hill was deeply influenced by John Ruskin’s belief in the transformative power of aesthetics and beauty.²⁶ Ruskin’s veneration of English architectural forms located a sense of national identity in the bricks and mortar of its built heritage. His instinct towards the conservation of an “authentic” material culture was, according to Baucom, steeped in both a sense of nostalgia and an urgent need to preserve Englishness itself from “imperial deformation.”²⁷ Thus, Ruskin’s vision of English culture and aesthetics was formed through an oppositional understanding of empire as a threat to the integrity and identity of the metropolitan centre. There was a moral and religious dimension to both Hill and Ruskin’s appreciation of beauty – it elevated the mind and was an expression of God’s nature and perfection. Underscored by these beliefs, the Trust was formally constituted with the power to “promote the permanent preservation for the benefit of the of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest.”²⁸

22 <https://www.stowe.co.uk/school/news/latest-news/stowe-s-past> [accessed 28.02.2023].

23 Hannah Young, “Negotiating Female Property and Slave-Ownership in the Aristocratic World,” *Historical Journal* 63, no.3 (2020): 581–602.

24 <https://blog.oup.com/2016/10/country-house-visiting-jane-austen/> [accessed 28.02.2023].

25 Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 46.

26 <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/who-was-octavia-hill> [accessed 28.02.2023].

27 Baucom, *Out of Place*: 49.

28 National Trust Act (1907).

A significant shift in the direction of acquisitions came through the passing of the National Trust Act in 1937. The Act was passed during a period in which many wealthy families faced financial ruin because of both changes to inheritance tax which, from 1894, was based on the capital value of land as well as the effects of the First World War and Great Depression. This led to the breakup and sale of many notable landed estates. Writing in 1931, George Holt Thomas lamented that “The landed classes are, in fact, being taxed out of existence under our very noses and before our very eyes [. . .]. In fifty years’ time who can say with any assurance if a single one of the great houses will still be in private hands?”²⁹ The Act paved the way for the Country House Scheme to be created which enabled estate owners to pass their property on to the Trust, avoid the payment of death duties and reside in the property for free for a further two generations. Thereafter the occupants would be charged at market rates. In return the property had to be at least partially opened to the public and meet strict requirements in relation to income generation or a large endowment for the upkeep. The Act allowed for the transformation of the private family home into a public asset. No longer the inheritance of elite individuals, they became part of the nation’s heritage.

Stately homes, as Peter Mandler has argued, occupy a particular place within the national heritage as key site for the construction of national identity. “They epitomise the English love of domesticity, of the countryside, of hierarchy, continuity and tradition.” They function as a “unique embodiment of the English character.”³⁰ Often centred around the histories of dynastic families, they have traditionally offered an understanding of history as rooted, local, and reassuringly unchanging. Peter Mitchell has analysed the ways that the Trust figures in the collective psyche of the nation. Quoting the essayist Patrick Wright, he wrote that the organisation functioned as “a kind of ethereal holding-company for the dead spirit of the nation” by which he meant that the Trust was a “receptacle for some of the mythic imaginings of the national relationship between place and identity.”³¹ The relationship between rurality and an authentic English self was made explicit by Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in a speech in 1924 when he declared “England is the country, and the country is England.”³² Drawing on an idealised version of agrarian pre-industrial society, these spaces have come to represent a “purer” version of the nation. Cleansed of the freneticism, dirt, and tensions of urban living, the country house is fixed in perpetual timelessness – outside of history despite its claims to historic tradition, unmoved by the passage of time and the changing mores of a society in flux.

²⁹ *The Bystander*, 23.12.1931.

³⁰ Peter Mandler, *Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997): 1.

³¹ Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia*: 80.

³² Stanley Baldwin, PM, “Speech to the Royal Society of St George,” 06.05.1924.

Whilst Patrick Wright critiqued the ways in which heritage presents a version of history “purged of political tension” in pursuit of “a unifying spectacle”,³³ Raphael Samuel argued that it offers “points of access to ‘ordinary people’, and a wider form of belonging.”³⁴ But belonging for whom? The country estate as emblematic of English rural life is a politicised form of heritage which is hierarchically structured through associations of class, gender, and race. The countryside is not a neutral space. As Caroline Knowles has argued

The countryside lies at the core of British national identity. It is appropriated in aggressive constructions of Britishness as enduring, cast in tradition and, above all, white. Thus rural life carries a heavy burden of *national representation*: appropriated as the essence of Englishness in landscape; and at the core of a deep connection between landscape and white racialness. Hence the countryside stands for more than it is: it produces, embodies and sustains whiteness on behalf of the nation.³⁵

The degree to which Black and Asian Britons have been excluded from the history, representation and physical landscape of rural England has been articulated by authors Andrea Levy, Benjamin Zephaniah and Lemn Sissay.³⁶ Although as Corinne Fowler has documented, the countryside has long been a source of inspiration for writers and artists of colour.³⁷ Discussing the cultural milieu into which his Booker prize winning text *The Remains of the Day* emerged, author Kazuo Ishiguro provided an astute analysis of the racial politics of the countryside and the great houses that his book invoked

The mythical landscape of this sort of England, to a large degree, is harmless nostalgia for a time that didn't exist. The other side of this, however, is that it is used as a political tool [. . .] a way of bashing anybody who tries to spoil this ‘Garden of Eden’. This can be brought out by the left or right, but usually it is the political right who say England was this beautiful place before the trade unions tried to make it more egalitarian or before immigrants started to come or before the promiscuous age of the ‘60s came and ruined everything’.³⁸

Whilst the city space is imagined as “overrun” within right wing anti-immigrant discourse, most infamously in Enoch Powell’s 1968 “River of Blood” speech, the countryside is constructed as ethnically homogenous and racially pure. As Paul Cloke has noted “The unsullied nature of rurality is predicated on a heritage which is assumed

33 Patrick Wright, *On Living in the Old Country* (London: Verso, 1985): 69.

34 Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory* (London: Verso, 1994): 160.

35 Caroline Knowles, “The Landscape of Post-Imperial Whiteness in Rural Britain,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 1 (2008): 173.

36 Paul Cloke, “Rurality and Racialised Others: Out of Place in the Countryside?” in *Rural Racism*, ed. Neil Chakraborti and Jon Garland (Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 2004): 17–18.

37 Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land: Creative Responses to Rural England’s Colonial Connections* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2020).

38 Kazuo Ishiguro quoted in Monika Gehlawat, “Myth and Mimetic Failure in *The Remains of the Day*,” *Contemporary Literature* 54, no. 3 (2013): 512–13.

to be white and Anglo-Saxon, with other social and cultural groups being excluded because they potentially threaten the political narrative of ‘acceptable’ history and heritage.”³⁹ In order to maintain this formulation the borders of the past have to be carefully policed in order to suppress the ways that histories of the countryside are interwoven with those of slavery and empire, connecting different communities across both time and space.⁴⁰

The construction of English national heritage, rural or otherwise, as exclusively white has grown increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of both historical research as well as demographic changes. Although there has been a historic Black presence in England since the Roman period, following the 1948 British Nationality Act, the imperial centre became home to a significant population of citizens from the Caribbean.⁴¹ They brought with them different perspectives on the history and experience of empire. To a far greater extent than the resident white British population, they understood England’s debt to slavery; this knowledge posed a challenge to the metropolitan vision of empire as a benevolent tool of civilisation. This transgenerational memory of enslavement was articulated by April Louise Pennant, the descendent of people who were “owned” by the Pennant family of Penrhyn Castle in Wales, now a Trust property. April’s grandparents arrived in Britain from Jamaica as part of the Windrush generation of the 1940s. She recalled being told about the Welsh origin of her name, but it was only when she moved to Wales that she began to unpick the tangled connections of her family’s links to Penrhyn. She visited the property in 2021 to lay flowers, stating that she viewed the space as a “monument” to their experiences and adding that “There would be no castle without slavery, there would be no quarry without slavery. I just thought that my ancestors had not been honoured.”⁴²

The emergence in the 1990s, under the Labour government, of a political narrative around multicultural Britain brought with it a reassessment of what exactly was meant by the term “national heritage.” In 1999 Stuart Hall delivered a keynote speech at the Arts Council England National Conference “Whose heritage? The impact of cultural diversity on Britain’s living heritage.” Hall grappled with the notion of what Laurajane Smith described as “authorised heritage discourse.”⁴³ “The Heritage” as Hall described it

39 Cloke, “Rurality and Racialised Others”: 24.

40 This disconnection has been challenged by research conducted by Susanne Seymour who led the project “Reconnecting Diverse Rural Communities: Black Presences and the Legacies of Slavery and Colonialism in Rural Britain, c.1600–1939,” <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/isos/research/rural-legacies.aspx> [accessed 28.02.2023].

41 For a comprehensive overview of Britain’s historic Black community see David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016).

42 April Louise Pennant quoted in Gaby Hinsliff, “Cream Teas at Dawn: Inside the War for the National Trust,” *The Guardian*, 16.10.2021.

43 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006): 29–34.

inevitably reflects the governing assumptions of its time and context. It is always inflected by the power and authority of those who have colonised the past, whose versions of history matter. These assumptions and co-ordinates of power are inhabited as natural – given, timeless, true and inevitable. But it takes only the passage of time, the shift of circumstances, or the reversals of history, to reveal those assumptions as time and context bound, historically specific, and thus open to contestation, re-negotiation, and revision. This is therefore an appropriate moment to ask, then, who is the Heritage for?⁴⁴

The question of ownership and authorship of the past remains as relevant today as it did when articulated by Hall. According to a source in the Department of Media and Culture quoted in the *Daily Mail* in 2021, “Ministers are increasingly frustrated with public bodies focusing on divisive parts of Britain’s history rather than celebrating our shared heritage.”⁴⁵ But Britain’s shared history and heritage includes slavery, and this cannot be not a matter for uncritical celebration. It is a difficult and divisive inheritance, and it must be faced as such because it is also part of the narrative that binds the nation. As Labour MP, David Lammy, pointed out during his speech on the 2018 Windrush scandal “My ancestors were British subjects, but they were not British subjects because they came to Britain. They were British subjects because Britain came to them, took them across the Atlantic, colonised them, sold them into slavery, profited from their labour and made them British subjects.”⁴⁶

The notion of “shared heritage” carries with it an expectation of equal possession of the past both in relation to the production of the historical narrative and access to the spaces of representation. Data published by the Arts Council England in 2019 demonstrated a lack of diversity within museum settings with “Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority” staff accounting for just 5 per cent of workers in 2017–18 (the general “BAME” population in England and Wales was noted as 16 per cent).⁴⁷ At managerial level this dropped to 4 per cent, specialist staff were 3 per cent and artistic staff were 0 per cent.⁴⁸ These statistics speak to a lack of control over the setting of organisational priorities and curatorial decision making for museum and heritage professionals of colour. The question then becomes who has the power to decide what the interpretation of this history should consist of and is that power shared equally? In a Britain in which the descendants of the enslaved live alongside the descendants of slave-owners – indeed where some people’s heritage draws from both – what stories are we to tell about the slaving past and who gets to tell them?

44 Stuart Hall, “Whose Heritage? Un-Settling ‘the Heritage’, Re-Imagining the Post-Nation,” *Third Text* 13, no. 49 (1999): 6.

45 Jack Wright, “Ministers Accuse Historic England of ‘Putting down Britain’s Past’ after Public Body Lists Villages with Links to Slavery in 157-page Report,” *Daily Mail*, 07.02.2021.

46 David Lammy, “Speech to Parliament on the Windrush Scandal,” 16.04.2018.

47 Arts Council England, “Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: A Data Report, 2017–2018.”

48 Arts Council England, “Representation at Different Job Levels, 2015–2017.”

3 Slavery, the National Trust, and “Culture War” Politics

In September 2020 the Trust published its Interim Report into its property’s links to slavery and colonialism.⁴⁹ The 115–page document was edited by three Trust curators and Professor Corrine Fowler, an academic at the University of Leicester. Fowler joined the Trust on secondment whilst she was managing an Arts Council England project *Colonial Countryside: National Trust Houses Reinterpreted*.⁵⁰ The project worked with primary school children (aged between 10–11) and 11 Trust properties to explore the houses’ connections to slavery and colonialism. This was done by looking at the family histories of those who had formerly owned these estates as well as material evidence from the collections, the fabric of the houses, and gardens. Children worked with creative practitioners to respond to these histories through poetry. They also worked with volunteer house guides using a “reverse mentoring” technique to find ways to include these histories in the houses’ onsite interpretation.

The Interim Report was divided in two, with the first section offering historical background to a range of different connections to slavery and empire including slave trading, slave-ownership, financial and mercantile activities, abolitionism, compensation, East India Company membership, and the historic Black presence. The second section was a gazetteer of the 93 properties – around a third of those cared for by the Trust – which were identified as having links and a brief overview of what these connections were. Different categories of connection were listed at the start with the qualifying statement that “although most of the entries in this section are of a similar length, this does not imply that the relationships of each of these places to histories of slavery and colonialism are of equal significance.”⁵¹ This positioning allowed the reader themselves to attach meaning (or not) to the links identified.

Although the Interim Report was commissioned in September 2019, the timing of its release coincided with a resurgence of interest in, and activities related to, the Black Lives Matter movement. In Britain the focus for many of those protesting coalesced around the signs and symbols of slavery still present in Britain’s built environment. The targeting of local landmarks, most famously the toppling of Bristol slave trader Edward Colston, enabled the campaigners to highlight how the history of slavery shaped racial inequality in the present. In response to the removal of various statues, and in particular the graffitied Winston Churchill’s statue with the word “racist,” right wing groups mobilised around the notion of defending Britain’s history

49 Sally-Anne Huxtable, Corinne Fowler, Christo Kefalas and Emma Slocombe, *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties Now in the Care of National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery* (Swindon: National Trust, 2020).

50 <https://colonialcountryside.wordpress.com/> [accessed 28.02.2023].

51 Huxtable et al., *Interim Report*: 62.

and heritage. This took the form of street demonstrations, press coverage and political pressure (both formal and informal). Whilst contestations about Britain's imperial past are not new, the intensity with which the discourse was pursued has led to claims that a "culture war" is now firmly underway.⁵²

The reception of the Interim Report is remarkable for the virulence of the backlash it received. Parts of the right-wing press in Britain launched a sustained campaign against the Trust, the *Colonial Countryside* project, and individuals involved in both. Over 170 newspaper articles were generated nationally and internationally, some of which included direct personal attacks on members of staff and project affiliates. Fowler spoke to the *Financial Times* about the personal impact on her "There were threats to my digital and personal security", says Fowler, who adds she now has four police crime reports to her name. 'People make physical threats – about and to me – whenever these kind of pieces come out.'⁵³ The issue of threats to heritage staff engaged with projects about slavery was also raised by Duncan Wilson, Chief Executive of Historic England, who told the BBC that the organisation no longer named individuals who worked on their research activities because of fears about staff safety.⁵⁴ Professor Priyamvada Gopal, an academic at the University of Cambridge, who has herself been subjected to an extensive negative press for her critical work on empire, commented that "I've not seen this kind of hostility actually directed at white scholars before [. . .]. It's something that's quite familiar to people of color who speak out."⁵⁵

Some of the headlines written in relation to the Interim Report and the *Colonial Countryside* project included "The National Trust must stop obsessing over colonialism" (*The Spectator*, 22 September 2020), "National Trust accused of bias over team investigating links to the slave trade" (*Daily Mail*, 16 December 2020), "The National Trust is trapped in hostility to Britain's heritage. It must end" (*The Telegraph*, 2 April 2021), "Britain's top cultural institutions are 'under threat' from a 'woke cult'" (*Daily Mail*, 5 June 2021). Some of the more disturbing reporting focused on the children involved in the project. Two pieces were published on the same day with largely the same content: "The National Trust 'asks children to denigrate British Empire'" (*The Times*, 6 April 2021) and "National Trust is accused of asking school children to 'denigrate their own history' by writing poems lamenting the British Empire" (*Daily Mail*, 6 April 2021). Both articles named one of the children involved and reprinted her poem. A running theme in the reporting drew a connection between the publication of the Interim Report and the Black Lives Matter movement. The prevalence of the phrase "woke" within these articles was notable. The

52 David Olusoga, "Historians Have Become Soft Targets in the Culture Wars," *New Statesman*, 08.10.2021.

53 Alex Barker and Peter Foster, "The War on Woke: Who Should Shape Britain's History," *Financial Times*, 11.06.2021.

54 Duncan Wilson interview on BBC Front Row, 23.02.2021.

55 Priyamvada Gopal quoted in Sam Knight, "Britain's Idyllic Country Houses Reveal a Darker History," *New Yorker*, 23.08.2021.

term originated in African American Vernacular English meaning “alert to racial prejudice and discrimination” but it has since been appropriated by right wing critics and transformed into a pejorative. Andrew Bridgen, a Conservative MP and critic of the Interim Report, told the *Times* that “This confirms our worst fears that they’ve [National Trust] been overtaken by divisive Black Lives Matter supporters.”⁵⁶ This claim was designed to link the more radical direct action which took place in Bristol to the more prosaic publication of an academic report to create a sense that these activities were part of the same spectrum – a slippery slope into the dismantling of much treasured heritage spaces. Recognising the ways that this framing had influenced the reception of the Interim Report, the director-general of the Trust Hilary McGrady stated that “My biggest mistake was publishing it when we did, because it got conflated with Black Lives Matter.”⁵⁷

The Interim Report was discussed within far-right forums such as Lotus Eater, which was founded by Carl Benjamin, a former United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) candidate whose racist views have been documented.⁵⁸ This mirrors some of the extreme reaction to the Trust’s previous foray into the history of slavery in 2007, when it published a short article about its properties’ connections in its magazine. According to the editor this piece elicited “the most extensive and heated responses from readers the magazine had ever received.”⁵⁹ Jessica Moody noted that the article was posted on the far-right website Stormfront along with the editor’s contact details so that its users could complain. As of 2023 the Lotus Eater YouTube video on the topic had 63,000 views. It contained the claim that white heritage was under attack and being replaced to suit the “woke agenda.” The presenters suggested that efforts to make the Trust “more appealing to BAME people” come “at the expense of whites, obviously, because that’s how it works, it’s a zero-sum game.”⁶⁰ The linguistic echoes of white supremacist “great replacement” theory are clear in the choice of language used in the discussion.⁶¹ It’s a concept previously utilised by the white nationalists who marched on Charlottesville in 2017 to defend what they framed as the removal of

56 Andrew Bridgen quoted in Charlie Parker, “National Trust Accused of Bias in the Study of Colonial History,” *The Times*, 16.12.2020.

57 Hilary McGrady quoted in David Sanderson, “National Trust Right to Dig up Slavery Links, Hilary McGrady Says,” *The Times*, 25.03.2021.

58 J. Lester Feder, “Steve Bannon Met a White Nationalist Facebook Personality during London Trip,” *BuzzFeed*, 11.10.2018.

59 Jessica Moody and Stephen Small, “Slavery and Public History at the Big House: Remembering and Forgetting at American Plantation Museums and British Country Houses,” *Journal of Global Slavery* 4, no. 1 (2019): 53.

60 Lotus Eater, “National Trust Goes Woke and Nearly Broke,” *You Tube*, 26.05.2021.

61 According to the Counter Extremism Project “The Great Replacement theory is an Ethno-nationalist theory warning that an indigenous European – e.g., white – population is being replaced by non-European immigrants. The Great Replacement concept was popularized by French writer Renaud Camus in his 2012 book, *Le Grand Remplacement*.”

their heritage in relation to the City Council's decision to take down a statue of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Tiki-torch carrying protestors chanted "you will not replace us" as they converged on a monument to the slave-owning president Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia. The theme was also picked up on by President Donald Trump in a speech to a rally in Phoenix in the aftermath of the events where he claimed that anti-racist activists were "trying to take away our culture. They're trying to take away our history."⁶²

Alongside the press reporting, a faction within the Conservative Party – the Common Sense Group of 59 MPs – formed with part of its mission defined as ensuring "that institutional custodians of history and heritage, tasked with safeguarding and celebrating British values, are not coloured by cultural Marxist dogma, colloquially known as the 'woke agenda.'"⁶³ This group reflected a notable shift to the right on cultural values within Conservatism which has occurred since the 2016 Brexit referendum and can in part be explained by its absorption of the more radically right-wing socially conservative UKIP vote during the 2019 general election. The relationship between support for Brexit and imperial nostalgia has been analysed and debated extensively.⁶⁴ The place of empire in the imaginary and rhetoric of Brexit can be read in the sloganeering of "Global Britain," "Empire 2.0" as well as a desire for "re-energising Britain's buccaneering spirit post-Brexit."⁶⁵ The group is led by the MP Sir John Hayes, who previously co-founded the arch-traditionalist Cornerstone Group whose motto is "Faith, Family, Flag." Hayes has been vocal in his defence of British imperial history, writing in the *Mail on Sunday* that "Well-funded woke zealots are denigrating our heritage, dishonouring our heroes and engineering the silence of those who dare question them."⁶⁶ The Common Sense Group has a notable contingent of Brexit supporting "Red Wall" MPs who won their seats in the 2019 general election in former Labour strongholds in North England and the Midlands. They authored a manifesto *Common sense: Conservative thinking for a post-liberal age* setting out their stall. It included a chapter by MP Gareth Bacon who wrote "Britain is under attack. Not in a physical sense, but in a philosophical, ideological and historical sense. Our heritage is under a direct assault – the very sense of what it is to be British has been called into question, institutions have been

⁶² Max Greenwood, "Trump on Removing Confederate Statues: 'They're Trying to Take Away Our Culture'," *The Hill*, 22.08.2017.

⁶³ <https://www.thecommonsensegroup.com/> [accessed 28.02.2023].

⁶⁴ Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (New York: Apollo, 2018); Stuart Ward and Astrid Rasch (eds.), *Embers of Empire in Brexit Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Robert Saunders, "Brexit and Empire: 'Global Britain' and the Myth of Imperial Nostalgia," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 48, no. 6 (2020): 1140–74; Peter Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia*; Philip Stevens, *Britain Alone: The Path from Suez to Brexit* (London: Faber and Faber, 2021).

⁶⁵ Ben Quinn, "'Three Brexiters' Chase Buccaneering Spirit of Empire in Choice of Art," *The Guardian*, 02.07.2017.

⁶⁶ Sir John Hayes, "British Values are Besieged – by a Cabal of Militant Agitators Well-Funded by the Taxpayer," *Mail on Sunday*, 04.10.2021.

undermined, the reputation of key figures in our country’s history have been traduced.”⁶⁷ Bacon’s rhetoric of a Britain in peril significantly overlapped with the vision of decline articulated in UKIP’s 2010 cultural policy document “Restoring Britishness.”⁶⁸ It opened with the line “Britain and Britishness are in trouble. They are being attacked and undermined, both externally and internally.” British national identity was presented as imperilled and in need of saving from multiple threats including the European Union, cultural Marxism, the liberal elite, political correctness, devolution, globalisation, and immigration. Much of what it contained related to its belief in the need to enforce “uniculturalism” as a means of rowing back on decades of multiculturalism. “The slavery issue” it argued, “has been deliberately used to undermine Britishness” leading to an erosion of national pride and with it a sense of identity. The document set out a whole raft of policies to “take back control” of the national narrative including intervening explicitly to politically realign the nation’s cultural institutions. This strategy seems to have been adopted by the Conservative government who have taken a more interventionist approach to culture over recent years, particularly in relation to Britain’s “contested” imperial heritage.

With the backing of a powerful lobby group of MPs, debates about the Trust moved from the newspapers into Parliament. A member of the Common Sense Group, the Conservative MP Tom Hunt, discussed the issue in the House of Commons raising “concerns that many of us have about many of our once-loved and currently loved national organisations being increasingly influenced and taken over by woke-ist elements.”⁶⁹ A Westminster Hall debate was organised by Conservative MP Andrew Murrison and attended by members of the Common Sense Group. In a disquisition on Ruskinian aesthetics, Hayes warned that the Trust must not “become involved in politics” because its “charitable purpose is ‘to look after places of beauty’. Beauty, because it is the exemplification of truth, is the most important thing to which we should all aspire.”⁷⁰ Hayes’ selective quoting from the National Trust Act of 1907 omitted any reference to its other purpose – to preserve places of “historic interest.” Despite his celebration of beauty as apolitical, privileging aesthetics over historical interpretation is a political choice – there is a politics to silence when it comes to the representation of slavery within heritage sites.

It is not just the fringes of the party that engaged in pushing the culture war narrative, in September 2020, then Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden issued a letter to national museums and galleries which stated that he would expect these bodies’ approaches to issues of “contested heritage”

67 Gareth Bacon, “What is Wokism and how Can it be Defeated?” Common Sense: Conservative Thinking for a Post-Liberal Age, <https://www.thecommonsensegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Common-Sense.pdf> [no longer available], 20.

68 <https://devolutionmatters.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/ukip-britishness.pdf> [accessed 28.02.2023].

69 Hansard Parliament, Business of the House, vol. 680, column 1149, 24.09.2020.

70 Hansard Parliament, Future of the National Trust, vol. 683, column 439WH, 11.11.2020.

to be consistent with the Government's position. Further, as publicly funded bodies, you should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics [. . .]. It is imperative that you continue to act impartially, in line with your publicly funded status, and not in a way that brings this into question. This is especially important as we enter a challenging Comprehensive Spending Review.⁷¹

Tying demands to follow the government's line on heritage to the upcoming budget is suggestive of a desire to exercise political control whilst claiming political neutrality. The threat to heritage organisation's ability to access funds to conduct research deemed useful and relevant to its audiences is a serious challenge to both institutional independence and academic integrity. In October 2020 Baroness Stowell, a Conservative peer who resigned the party whip to become Chair of the Charity Commission, stated that she had written to the Trust in relation to "public concerns" about the Interim Report.⁷² The Charity Commission is a regulatory body with the power to strip organisations of their charitable status which has a significant impact on their ability to fund themselves. Stowell cited the Trust's "clear, simple purpose, which is about preserving some of our great historic places and places of great beauty and national treasure." She went on to state that "What people expect of the National Trust is that they focus on that purpose, they don't lose sight of that." The inference was that researching slavery connections to the properties in its care was somehow a deviation from the Trust's core mission. The Common Sense Group wrote a letter to *The Telegraph* in support of Stowell's move.⁷³ Hilary McGrady, the director-general of the Trust, rejected the claim writing that "If researching the history of National Trust places is wrong, then we've been doing something wrong for 125 years."⁷⁴ Following an investigation, the Charity Commission reported that the Trust had acted within its remit therefore "there are no grounds for regulatory action."⁷⁵

Pressure continued to be exerted on cultural institutions when, in February 2021, Dowden summoned 25 heritage organisations to a summit, where, according to the *Museums Journal*, "Institutions were reminded that they should remain impartial and not be beholden to a 'vocal minority.'"⁷⁶ *Museums Journal* reported that "there is concern among institutions that official guidance from government on editorial or academic matters would breach the arm's length principle, as well as putting certain topics off-limits because of fears that funding will be affected." This was a concern

71 Oliver Dowden, Letter from Culture Secretary on HM Government position on "contested heritage," 22.09.2020.

72 Christopher Hope, "National Trust Could Face Enquiry into its Purpose," *The Telegraph*, 23.10.2020.

73 "Britain's Heroes," letter to *The Telegraph*, 09.11.2020.

74 https://twitter.com/hmcg_dgnt/status/1319992224621469696 [accessed 28.02.2023].

75 Helen Stephenson, "Engaging with Controversial or Divisive Issues – Reflections for Charities," Charity Commission, 11.03.2021.

76 Geraldine Kendall Adams, "'Polite but Managed' Summit Fails to Allay Concerns about Government Overreach," *Museums Journal*, 26.02.2021, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/02/polite-but-managed-summit-fails-to-allay-concerns-about-government-overreach/#> [accessed 19.01.2023].

echoed by the Royal Historical Society who issued a letter to *The Times* in March 2021 outlining their belief in the necessity of the maintenance of the Haldane Principle – that “decisions on individual research proposals are best taken by researchers themselves through peer review.”⁷⁷ Respect for this principle, they hoped, would ensure “the freedom of professional curators and academics working in museums and universities on ‘contested heritage’ to do their jobs without government interference.”⁷⁸ The degree to which the government will adhere to these requests is questionable. As Nigel Huddleston, then Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, made clear “The chief executive was reported as saying that the National Trust was still deciding how it will use information in the recent slavery report, and the Government will continue to take an interest in that.”⁷⁹

4 Dyrham Park: Re-Presenting Slavery in the Country House

Despite accusations launched at the Trust of “presenteeism,” the issue of how slavery has been represented within country house heritage sites has a history of its own. It is not simply something which has emerged in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, but rather it is a subject that has been grappled with for many decades. Dyrham is a Trust property in Gloucestershire, England. It was included in the Interim Report for its numerous connections to the history of slavery. It is an interesting case study because although financial connections to the slave economy are clearly part of the family wealth used to buy and renovate the property, they do not take the assumed form of slave and plantation ownership. Instead, they came about through a transgenerational involvement in mercantile activity, privateering and most notably William Blathwayt’s (c.1649–1717) long career in colonial administration. Blathwayt served as William III’s Secretary of War and of State and Secretary to the Board of Trade, both positions which allowed him to wield administrative power over Britain’s Atlantic empire in both the Caribbean and North America. In that sense they highlight the deep embeddedness of slavery across different areas of the British economy and state. The ledger book and state papers might not have the visceral association of the whip, but they were nonetheless a vital part of managing and profiteering from slave labour. Dyrham’s history also allows us to consider the vital but underrepresented issue of women’s role in the business of slavery.⁸⁰ William came to ownership of Dyr-

⁷⁷ Royal Historical Society, letter to *The Sunday Times*, 21.03.2021.

⁷⁸ Peter Mandler, “Historians on ‘Contested Heritage’,” Royal Historical Society Blog, 27.05.2021.

⁷⁹ Hansard Parliament, Future of the National Trust, vol. 683, column 441WH, 11.11.2020.

⁸⁰ For an account of elite women’s connections to slavery see Hannah Young, “Negotiating Female Property and Slave-Ownership in the Aristocratic World,” *Historical Journal* 63, no.3 (2020): 581–602.

ram through his marriage to Mary Wynter (1650–1691) whose family had been active in the Caribbean slave economy since the sixteenth century.⁸¹ Mary’s position as a landed heiress meant she was a conduit for the transmission of slave-based wealth and property.

The house itself contains the material traces of Britain’s imperial networks of trade, goods, and people. As the Trust’s website points out, the Old Staircase in the west range was made in the 1690s from imported Virginian black walnut.⁸² A further staircase in the east range was made from cedar from Maryland as well as Virginia walnut. Stephanie Barczewski noted that “Blathwayt obtained this exotic timber by wielding his influence over his colonial governors.”⁸³ The use of slave-produced mahogany in Britain’s grand stately homes was widespread and by 1750 nearly £30,000 worth of the timber was being imported into Britain from the Caribbean and Central America.⁸⁴ Commodities from the empire also formed part of day-to-day life for the Blathwayt family who consumed all kinds of products whose origins could be found in empire. Blathwayt’s biographer, Gertrude Ann Jacobsen, noted that “He accepted almost any gift, from sturgeon fresh from the North Sea, Spanish bricks of tobacco, or orange marmalade from Barbados, to ermine from New England for a cloak for Mrs. Blathwayt.”⁸⁵

To participate fully in the culture of conspicuous consumption Blathwayt needed to build a suitable collection to reflect his good taste. He was helped in this endeavour by his uncle Thomas Povey, who nurtured his colonial ambitions and supported him as a young man. Povey was also involved in the colonial project having helped to equip the expedition which resulted in the colonisation of Jamaica. He wrote a tract on colonial management, and both proposed and served on the first Council of Trade for America. He was also an investor in the Royal African Company.⁸⁶ Povey sold Blathwayt his library, furniture, and art collection for use at Dyrham. Perhaps the most controversial objects in Povey’s collection were two torchieres carved into the kneeling figure of enslaved Africans. A letter from John Povey, Blathwayt’s nephew and clerk, to Thomas in 1700 offered a glimpse into how the objects were originally displayed. He wrote “In these several Apartments your pictures have a Great share in the Decoration as the two Black Boys have a Proper Place on Each side of an Indian Tambour in one of the Best Rooms [. . .].”⁸⁷ They appeared again in a 1710 inventory of the house when they were

81 Madge Dresser, “Slavery and West Country Houses,” in *Slavery and the British Country House* 23.

82 <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dyrham-park/features/dyrham-parks-colonial-connections> [accessed 28.02.2023].

83 Barczewski, *Country Houses*: 165.

84 Barczewski, *Country Houses*: 167.

85 Gertrude Ann Jacobsen quoted in Barczewski, *Country Houses*: 164.

86 <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dyrham-park/features/dyrham-parks-colonial-connections> [accessed 28.02.2023].

87 <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/452977.2> [accessed 28.02.2023].

described “as ‘Blacks’ in the Balcony Room, alongside the red and black lacquer and gilded tea table, Javanese, late 17th century.” Both descriptions were suggestive of an imperial *mélange* of goods brought together within the space in order to juxtapose a traditional English country house aesthetic with more “exotic” colonial objects. The torchieres have appeared in the house catalogue as “Black Boys,” “Blacks,” “stands for flowers,” and “blackamoor stands.” In 2019 when they were re-catalogued as “stand.”⁸⁸ These changes are suggestive of the shifting modes of linguistic representation when it comes to working through how these “difficult” objects should be categorised.

Alongside objects depicting enslavement or made from raw materials produced by enslaved people there are also objects in the collection that belonged to other slave-owners. There are five ceiling paintings at Dyrham originally painted by Andrea Casali for display at Fonthills Splendens, the home of the Jamaican planter William Beckford (1709–1770). They were sold in 1801 and installed at the Theatre Royal in Bath before being purchased by Colonel William Blathwayt (1797–1871) in 1845.⁸⁹

Botanical collecting became a popular way of consuming the empire. In 1696, John Woodward issued advice to collectors in the colonies that “Gathering and preserving [. . .] may be done by the hands of servants and that too at their spare and leisure times: or in journies, in the plantations, in fishing, fowling, & c. without hindrance of any other business.”⁹⁰ The “servants” referred to included enslaved people who, in the seventeenth century, were used by collectors because of their knowledge of natural science. Colonial officials working with Blathwayt were tasked with identifying seeds and plants which could be used to ornament Dyrham’s landscaped gardens. In 1693 Blathwayt shipped to England for use in his garden “Peach Stones,” “Black Walnuts,” “Pokekera or White Walnuts,” “Hickory Nuts,” “Tulip Tree Cones,” “Sassafras Berrys,” “Cyprus Acadia,” “Gum Tree,” and “Cedar Berrys.” They were planted in the wilderness area alongside Virginia pine, and flowering oaks.⁹¹ Blathwayt also used his connections to import “exotic” species to complement his landscaping including “two Rattle Snakes put on board in a Cage”.⁹²

There is far more to the history of Dyrham’s colonial connections than a focus on the origins of wealth or materiality of artefacts. The Trust has noted that there were several Black “servants” linked to the Wynter family, some of whom had connections to Dyrham. Gylman Ivie, described as “an African” in 1575, married Anna Spencer of Dyrham and the couple had two children.⁹³ George Wynter’s daughter was married

88 <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/452977.2> [accessed 28.02.2023].

89 <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/453808> [accessed 28.02.2023].

90 John Woodward quoted in James Delbourgo, *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019): 97.

91 Barczewski, *Country Houses*: 226.

92 Barczewski, *Country Houses*: 223.

93 <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/dyrham-park/features/dyrham-parks-colonial-connections> [accessed 28.02.2023].

into the Ivie family which the Trust suggests is how Gylman came to be at Dyrham. Gylman was not the only African man that the Wynter family employed. Miranda Kaufmann noted that Edward Wynter had an African porter named Edward Swarthyne and that Edward's father William had a servant from Guinea named Domingo.⁹⁴

A more direct connection to the house came through the presence of Mary Sarah Hibbert Oates (1834–1925), the illegitimate mixed heritage daughter of the Jamaica attorney George Hibbert Oates (1791–1837) and a free woman of colour Margaret Cross. In October 2021 the Trust highlighted Mary's story during Black History Month.⁹⁵ Oates's family had been heavily involved for generations with a variety of different aspects of the business of slavery in Jamaica.⁹⁶ They owned 7 plantations and had financial or legal control over 21 more. Oates became a source of embarrassment following a public *exposé* about conditions on one of the family's plantations – Georgia – where Oates acted as attorney. A missionary, Reverend Thomas Cooper, sent out by the Hibberts to preach to the enslaved wrote a pamphlet which included the accusation that Oates had impregnated a sixteen-year-old girl.⁹⁷ This was a claim he strenuously denied. Oates's will confirmed that he did in fact have a “reputed” daughter called Mary Oates who was “a free girl of colour formerly a slave on Georgia estate.”⁹⁸ His will detailed three more children with enslaved women who lived on various properties the family were linked to. Oates was also involved in a long-term relationship with a free woman of colour named Margaret Cross with whom he had a further five children. He made provisions in his will for both Margaret and her children including money for their education. Their youngest daughter Mary Sarah was born in 1833 – the year that Britain passed the Slavery Abolition Act. This meant that for the first year of her life, up until 1834 when the practice of slavery ended, her older half-siblings were enslaved.

Oates died four years after Mary Sarah's birth, and in 1840 the little girl was sent to England to live with her grandmother and aunt in Sion Hill, Bath. Mary Sarah was welcomed into the Hibbert family home. She was educated and documents exist written in her own hand which attested to the kind of lifestyle she was living. In 1867 she travelled with a “Miss Hibbert” to France.⁹⁹ She kept a travel journal documenting the

94 Miranda Kaufmann, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (London: Oneworld, 2017): 100–104.

95 <https://twitter.com/nationaltrust/status/1451462095166390274>

96 For an account of the Hibbert family's involvement with the slavery business see Katie Donington, *The Bonds of Family: Slavery, Commerce and Culture in the British Atlantic World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

97 Thomas Cooper, *Correspondence between George Hibbert, Esq., and the Rev. T. Cooper: Relative to the Condition of the Negro Slaves in Jamaica, Extracted from the Morning Chronicle, also a Libel on the Character of Mr. and Mrs. Cooper, Published in 1823, in Several of the Jamaica Journals; with Notes and Remarks* (London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1824).

98 Will of George Hibbert Oates, National Archives, England, PROB 11/1886/418.

99 Transcription of Diary of Mary Sarah Hibbert Oates, 1867, Diary part of NT 453490 BOX 26, Dyrham Park, National Trust.

experience which included watercolour paintings that she made. Her account is fascinating for the strong sense of Englishness which she articulated in it. On the journey she wrote “Going on deck I took my first view of a foreign shore, and English as Boulogne is said to be it presented many peculiarities to my eyes.” Her emphasis on the strangeness of this encounter is fascinating to consider in the context of her own early childhood in colonial Jamaica of which she must have had at least some hazy memories. When Mary Sarah’s aunt died in 1870, the Reverend Wynter Thomas Blathwayt acted as a trustee for her £20,000 estate. In 1876 he married Mary Sarah, who became his second wife and a stepmother to his children. To begin with they lived in Dyrham Rectory but when he inherited Dyrham in 1899, Mary became lady of the house. Dyrham, then, is quintessentially a dynastic imperial formation; its purchase and renovation, the fabric of its natural and built environment, and its previous occupants were all enmeshed in Britain’s transatlantic story. These histories are not peripheral to an understanding of the house, nor are they a new innovation; they haven’t emerged because of a “political fad” – they have always been there.

For several decades work has been done by curators to interpret the slaving past within the house, although different levels of prominence have been afforded over time. Jessica Moody and Stephen Small compared the interpretation of slavery at English country houses and American plantation house museums. Moody focused on an analysis of the ways slavery has been interpreted at Dyrham over time.¹⁰⁰ She argued that a lack of engagement with slavery, colonialism, and Black history has led to a lack of diversity within the visiting public. In 2008, the membership of the Trust was less than one per cent Black.¹⁰¹ During the bicentenary in 2007, First Born Creatives (a partnership between Shawn Sobers and Rob Mitchell) won Heritage Lottery funding for the project *Re:interpretation*. The project worked with local African-Caribbean community groups using multi-media to explore the slavery connections within three Trust sites including Dyrham. In an interview in *The*, Sobers recounted his first visit to the house with a group of people from the Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizens Association, where they came face to face with the torchieres discussed earlier. In response to encountering these objects he stated

I couldn’t believe it. I really couldn’t believe it was happening [. . .] And the tour guide talked about every single thing in that room, you know, talked about *everything* for a good ten, fifteen minutes and not once mentioned it [. . .] There wasn’t even a kind of a, you know, ‘Yeah, we don’t know what those are [. . .]’ There wasn’t even an explaining it away. They just acted as if they just weren’t there at all.¹⁰²

Sobers and Mitchell have suggested that tour guides’ reluctance to refer to slavery stemmed from their perceived role as “custodians” which made them “understand-

¹⁰⁰ Moody and Small, “Slavery and Public History”: 34–68.

¹⁰¹ Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land*: 127.

¹⁰² Knight, “Britain’s Idyllic Country Houses Reveal a Darker History”: 2021.

ably protective of the reputation of their properties and families.”¹⁰³ This sense of duty to the dead was expanded by Conservative MP Jacob Rees Mogg to encompass the entire Trust whom he advised to “remember that its properties were given to it by people who expected it to be a custodian of our history, to be proud of our history and to think well of our great nation.”¹⁰⁴ Timms has analysed the relationship between the notion of stewardship and heritage as a “gift,” noting that

Heritage hints at the providential, a benefaction whose immensity and value could only come from something almost divine [. . .] such a great gift forever puts the receiving present in debt, one that must be repaid through its invocation of stewardship: as the gift or legacy does not originate with us, it is never truly ours [. . .] what is passed along is forever marked by the resonance of the original donor or benefactor who retains some residual claim.¹⁰⁵

This conceptualisation raises questions about the power relations of heritage – who owns the past and how might that impact on the ways in which it is interpreted? Whilst the country house might be claimed by the family in residence, theirs is not the only history contained within these sites. In the transition from individual to national ownership, it was not just the physical sites that were rendered more democratically accessible but the authorship of the historical narrative and claims to representation within these spaces.

Moody compared various iterations of the house guide from 2009 and 2017. She pointed out that up until the new version was authored by curator Rupert Goulding, there was a failure to engage in any significant way with the sources of Blathwayt’s wealth.¹⁰⁶ The only mention of his colonial activities came in the guise of contextualising the presence of Virginian walnut trees in the garden. Whilst the 2017 guide made much more of an effort to account for Blathwayt’s colonial connections, Moody argued that this history was not fully articulated in the on-site interpretation. Using the example of torchieres, she pointed to the use of interpretation cards which asked questions of the visitor to include them in the work of deciphering the meaning. These included “What are they?” “Who would want them” and “Was the house owned by a slave-owner?”¹⁰⁷ The cards outlined the history of the objects as well of aspects of Britain’s involvement with slavery through colonial administration which would likely be unknown to most visitors. Both the guidebook and the cards relied on an active audience engagement with interpretive tools, but as strategies for representing the history they were optional and could very easily be missed or in the case of the guidebook not purchased.

¹⁰³ Rob Mitchell and Shawn Sobers, “Re:Interpretation: The Representation of Perspectives on Slave Trade History Using Creative Media,” in *Slavery and the British Country House*: 146.

¹⁰⁴ Hansard Parliament, Business of the House, vol. 680, column 1149, 24.09.2020.

¹⁰⁵ Timms, *Heritage*: viii.

¹⁰⁶ Moody and Small, “Slavery and Public History”: 57.

¹⁰⁷ Moody and Small, “Slavery and Public History”: 60.

A further intervention came in 2012 when Dyrham held an exhibition entitled *A World Away*. The display showcased pieces borrowed from the Arts Council Collection including a painting by Soweto-born Johannes Phokela which reimagined Ruben’s *Sampson and Delia* with the inclusion of an African man as the central figure.¹⁰⁸ The piece was hung above the two torchieres and acted as a comment on racial politics of aesthetics and taste, collecting, and the relationship between luxury consumption and colonial exploitation. The insertion of the artwork into the space meant an unavoidable confrontation with the history, although Moody noted that not all visitors made sense of the connections between the objects and the painting in the same way. Whilst the exhibition went much further in demanding that audiences take account of the history of slavery and race, it was a temporary display and once dismantled the issue of silence and “disavowal” came back into play.¹⁰⁹

The inclusion of the Phokela piece at Dyrham mirrors a wider impulse within heritage spaces to use artistic interventions to critique the underlying collection or historical narrative. Whilst this strategy can and does yield creative and thought-provoking responses in the visiting public, it also highlights a significant problem with relying on project work or short-term exhibitions to do the work of interpreting “difficult” histories. Time limited representational practices perpetuate the idea that these histories are marginal – that they do not form the core of the way that we should understand the sites. This was a problem identified in relation to the historical projects undertaken during the bicentenary in 2007. Some Black community groups who worked with heritage sites felt let down when both the funding and the visibility of their work came to an end. This feeling was especially acute where there was an absence of legacy planning to ensure the history continued to have some form of permanent presence in the interpretation.¹¹⁰ In response to the negative publicity surrounding the *Colonial Countryside* project and the Interim Report, the Trust published a statement addressing the press furor. It emphasised the transitory nature of the intervention, stating that “The Trust has supported a lot of creative work in education to enable the next generation to explore and appreciate historic buildings and collections, as well as nature. These are temporary projects and they don’t replace our usual curatorial and conservation work when it comes to permanent collections.”¹¹¹ An inference can be made that the statement was designed to reassure the critics that business would soon return to normal – that the nastiness of confronting slavery in the country house would soon be over. It will be fascinating to see what, if anything, emerges in relation to permanent changes to the onsite interpretation in the wake of the Interim Report and the backlash that has followed.

108 Moody and Small, “Slavery and Public History”: 61.

109 For a discussion of the concept of disavowal in relation to slavery see Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick, “Thinking about Denial,” *History Workshop Journal* 84 (2017): 1–23.

110 Oldfield and Wills, “Remembering 1807”: 264–65.

111 John Orna Ornstein, “How the *Colonial Countryside* Project is Helping Children Engage with History,” National Trust Blog, 18.11.2020.

5 Conclusion

The struggle over interpretation in country houses is a microcosm of a wider struggle taking place, in the wake of Brexit and in the longer term as Britain more widely, but England in particular, faces a reckoning with its imperial past and post-imperial identities. Understanding, acknowledging, and honestly representing the history of slavery as embedded within and wholly part of the national narrative is part of the process of reconfiguring a sense of identity to take account of all those whose stories have been marginalised. As Stuart Hall argued:

Across the great cities and ports, in the making of fortunes, in the construction of great houses and estates, across the lineages of families, across the plunder and display of the wealth of the world as an adjunct to the imperial enterprise, across the hidden histories of stuated heroes, in the secrecy of private diaries, even at the centre of the great master-narratives of ‘Englishness’ like the Two World Wars, falls the unscripted shadow of the forgotten ‘Other’. The first task, then, is re-defining the nation, re-imagining ‘Britishness’ or ‘Englishness’ itself in a more profoundly inclusive manner. The Brits owe this, not to only us, but to themselves: for to prepare their own people for success in a global and de-centred world by continuing to misrepresent Britain as a closed, embattled, self-sufficient, defensive, ‘tight little island’ would be fatally to disable them.¹¹²

Despite the amplification of critical voices by sections of the media and the political classes, the membership of the Trust has been broadly in favour of the work. The Trust reported to the *Guardian* that they received 771 complaints about the report.¹¹³ To put that in perspective that represents 0.05 per cent of the membership. When the right-wing thinktank Policy Exchange conducted polling in June 2020 they asked respondents if they thought that the Trust should or should not do more to educate visitors about the history of slavery with 76 per cent of people saying that they should do more.¹¹⁴ Although no figures are available in relation to the number of people who specifically cancelled their membership because of the publication of the Interim Report, the Trust released figures for new members for the period April 2020–2021 which totalled 50,000. Renewal rates for existing Trust membership remained consistent with the previous year at 82.4 per cent.¹¹⁵ Reflecting back on Dowden’s admonition to heritage organisations not to give into the demands of a “noisy minority” of political activists, questions can and should be asked about the influence of a small group of right-wing campaigners whose beliefs have been amplified by political and media power. In doing so we must return to Hall’s unanswered question – who is the heritage for?

¹¹² Hall, “Whose Heritage?”: 6.

¹¹³ Patrick Butler, “National Trust Report on Slavery Links Did Not Break Charity Law,” *The Guardian*, 11.03.2021.

¹¹⁴ <https://policyexchange.org.uk/historymatterspolling/>

¹¹⁵ Kirsty Weakley, “Do Real People Care How ‘Woke’ the National Trust is? Or Are They Just After a Decent Scone,” *Civil Society*, 09.11.2021.

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