
The Leverhulme Trust

Awards in Focus

Working the British slave trade

Speaking during the bicentennial commemoration in 2007 of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the UK Culture Minister stated that 'Understanding the slave trade and its legacy is vital to broadening our history and recognition of the challenges we still face as a society today.' I am engaged in a study of the origins and development of slave labour in the British Americas. My research suggests that the development of racial slavery in the forms we know was anything but a foregone conclusion.

I begin with the British slave trading forts and castles on the Gold Coast of West Africa, and the nature of the work undertaken by blacks and whites (some free, some bound), which facilitated the slave trade. I explore the remarkable fluidity of categories of race and of bound and free labour on the Gold Coast: the work of blacks and whites in West Africa bore little relation to the work of slaves and whites institutionalized in the Americas by the late-eighteenth century.

Labour and race were similarly complicated on slave ships themselves, as revealed in descriptions of the lives and work of the black and white, free and bound sailors who crewed these infernal vessels. Only sailors in the Royal Navy were treated more harshly, and although these sailors were in a better position than the Africans they transported, many cannot be described as fully free labourers.

The first port of call for most British slave ships was Barbados, the first place in the British Americas to develop integrated plantation economies. By the mid-1600s Barbados was the richest colony in the Caribbean, and the practices developed there spread throughout Britain's American colonies. However, my research is helping to demonstrate that the vital early stages of the Barbados 'sugar revolution' was largely fuelled by bound white labour. In their thousands, English, Irish and Scottish men and women were sent to the colony. Few volunteered, and many were convicts, vagrants and prisoners of war or captives from unsuccessful rebellions, from Cromwell's captives from Drogheda in the mid-1600s to Scots captured after the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745. Given very lengthy terms of servitude, and with little hope of survival let alone land or work at the end of their tenure, these white labourers were often referred to as slaves. Only slowly, and for a variety of reasons, did African slavery come to replace this

white workforce, whose remaining survivors lived in abject poverty.

By integrating research into slave and free labour in coastal West Africa, aboard slave ships and in Barbados, my work will help us to rethink the origins and development of racial slavery in the British world. Historians of slavery in the Caribbean and mainland North America have explored and explained the development of inter-related categories of race and bound labour in terms of local needs and conditions. My work shows that the experiences, the standard practices, and the developing traditions of work in West Africa, on slave ships and in early Barbados all pointed towards the creation of far less fixed categories of both race and labour. The eventual development of remarkably rigid categories of race and labour by the late-eighteenth century required the systematic rejection of virtually all pre-existing patterns and experiences of black and white labour.

Professor Simon Newman
University of Glasgow

Simon was awarded a Major Research Fellowship in 2009; providing £86,296 over 24 months.

Below: Ruined former slave dwellings on the Codrington Plantation, Barbados (the archives of the Codrington Plantation are held in London and Oxford, and are a vital resource for this research).



Top: Floral tributes left in the dungeon for female slaves. Floral tributes left in the dungeon for female slaves in Cape Coast Castle (Ghana) by African American visitors.

Bottom: The 'Door of No Return', Cape Coast Castle (Ghana). The 'Door of No Return', Cape Coast Castle (Ghana), through which many tens of thousands of slaves passed as they were transported out to slave ships.

