Legacies of British Slave-Ownership

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In 1833, after centuries of resistance and rebellion by enslaved people, decades of popularly-mobilized antislavery protests, and years of economic struggle on colonial plantations, England's Parliament initiated the process of slave emancipation in the British Empire. It could not begin, however, until slave owners were promised the astronomical sum (at the time) of £20 million in compensation – a stunning request for reparations in light of the actual victims of abuse. Once agreed to, thousands of individuals lodged claims for the government's elimination of what their ledger books deemed to be property. This set in motion the accumulation of a voluminous repository of information on the extent and character of slavery in the Empire, spanning from the Caribbean, to Mauritius, to South Africa. Like many tragedies in recent human history, the bureaucracy and accounting of slavery was thorough, detailed, and precise. With each claim, the map of colonial slavery was filled in with statistics on the proprietors of each estate, the sizes and supposed worth of their holdings, and the number of enslaved people toiling under them. Once finished, the Slave Compensation Commission had compiled an enormous index documenting the vast reach of slavery into the very homes and firms of Britain.

The stunningly-comprehensive and meticulously-researched website *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* (*LBS*) started off by making public these Slave Compensation Commission records, which are currently held at the National Archives in Kew, England. For the site's first phase, funding through the UK's Economic & Social Research Council and the Arts & Humanities Research Council identified the British recipients who obtained roughly half the £20 million funding allotment. Although not all claims could be traced, researchers at University College London, led by distinguished scholars Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, and Keith McClelland, were able to record where most of the money eventually landed. The second phase of the project, aided by supplemental funds from Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, set about compiling additional information on the thousands of plantations linked to Compensation claims – as well as those with no record of compensation – from the end of the Seven Years' War up to emancipation. A planned third phase seeks to connect these estates to the Slave Registrations undertaken by Parliament from 1813 to 1834, which list the names, ages, conditions, and in some cases

family histories, of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people on those estates. In total, it is a massive undertaking, which has thus far produced one of the most important digital resources on the history of slavery, and which aims to provide perhaps the most complex and in-depth inventory of the institutional and economic history of colonial bondage, as well as those who lived under it.

The amount of information in the *LBS* database is truly staggering, and the work put in by researchers deserves to be loudly applauded. The Slave Compensation Commission records are only a fraction of the sources available to the site's visitors. Plantation records, personal correspondence, biographical memoirs, political pamphlets, portraiture, wills, and other documents sketch out the contours of an industry whose economic tendrils wrapped themselves tightly around businesses and individuals throughout the globe. Organizing all of this data, and making it comprehensible, was a herculean task. By and large those efforts were successful, but at first glance visitors might feel a bit overwhelmed. One might best approach the database, then, by exploring the three major categories listed immediately below the site's header: 'Legacies', 'Estates', and 'Maps'.

The 'Legacies' tab contains a number of sub-categories, but it is effectively the result of the project's first phase to provide an inventory of who received compensation, and where that money ended up. It is also perhaps the most complicated of the site's sections to navigate. A 'Project overview' essay gives some context and interpretation, but those primarily interested in the major discoveries of the compensation claims should consult two recent publications that came out of the database, and which were authored and edited by the principal *LBS* team.⁽¹⁾ The findings of both books are nuanced, but they do lend some general support to Eric Williams's original arguments about colonial slavery directly financing the development of industrial capitalism in Europe.⁽²⁾ Certainly, the sources point to widespread payments made across Britain after 1833. To give some sense of the mammoth cache of materials available under the 'Legacies' tab, one can examine 845 cases of compensation moneys being reinvested in 535 different British firms, 229 cases of money put into cultural institutions in Britain, 309 cases of compensation allotments sent off into imperial business schemes, 388 instances of reimbursements invested in country homes and public buildings, and many hundreds more compensation recipients who took prominent places in British society through political service and public engagement.

The amount of data for each case varies considerably, but often a great deal of information is available. Judith Philip's thorough biography, for instance, documents in vivid detail her birth in Grenada, relocation to London, and eventual return to the Caribbean, with concluding sections enumerating the nearly £7,000 she received for her three estates, as well as her familial and business relationships. There are no records linking that money to investments in British companies, but her biography demonstrates how widely her riches were bequeathed to relatives.⁽³⁾ Charles Richard Bigge's biography is far slimmer, recording only his status as a trustee to two Jamaican estates. But the more than £2,500 he received in compensation for those properties likely went into at least one of the twenty-four railway investments he made over the course of his life.⁽⁴⁾ Countless commercial firms and grand country homes are also listed here, with their board members and residents having received compensations as well. In the frequent absence of connecting evidence for these cases, the implication is that those companies and landed estates either could not have succeeded, or would not have been purchased, without money directly tied to slavery. This is likely true for most, yet there are a significant number of individuals and firms in the database that appear to be included simply by association, rather than by direct reinvestment. The Life Insurance Company of Scotland, for example, is noted as a beneficiary of slave compensation, but this is an assertion linked only to the fact that James Auchinleck Cheyne, who would eventually receive several thousand pounds in claims, was the company's manager the year before emancipation.⁽⁵⁾ This should not detract from the larger argument about Britain's substantial personal and business connections to slavery, but visitors to the site should be aware that some ties were stronger than others. At the very least, those logging onto the *LBS* database will witness how much British landed wealth and the mercantile economy overlapped and intersected with colonial slavery.

The final two major categories on the site – 'Estates' and 'Maps' – lay out an unbelievable amount of data about colonial slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries. The goal of these sections, which come out of the

second phase of the whole *LBS* project, is to provide a complete census of plantations and pens in the British Empire. The 'Estates' section looks and functions much the same as the 'Legacies' tab. One can peruse more than 10,000 estate records, which contain a mix of compensation allotments, enumerations of enslaved people, ownership and mortgage histories, and links to supplemental data. The tab for 'Maps' contains cartographic layouts of estates in Jamaica, Barbados, and Grenada, alongside a map of British businesses and homes tied to enslaved property. This is the most user-friendly of the database's sections, as estates are geotagged onto gorgeous 18th-century, and present-day, maps. Visitors can click on any of the tagged properties to link back to information on the estate, firm, and individual. Work is ongoing for the Barbados and Grenada maps, but 824 of the 5,125 Jamaican estates in the *LBS* database are currently positioned, as are roughly three-quarters of the nearly 4,000 British addresses identified. Together, they form an atlas of colonial slavery, and a cartography of domestic involvement in unfree labor.

The amount of data available, and the thoroughness with which the site's researchers connect various bits of information back to each estate and person, is truly astounding. Unlike many digital humanities projects, this is not simply an open-access repository of a select archive. Instead, it is a highly cultivated collection of an extraordinary amount of material; not only are errant scraps collated back to the Compensation records, but the biographies of recipients are fortified with probate and personal sources. Moreover, citations for all of this information are painstakingly recorded, allowing users to find the original material quite easily on their own. A quick look through the *LBS* database will convince any skeptic that the profits from slavery had a significant impact on Britain's domestic economy, and that the colonial world of the enslaved was anything but severed from the metropole.

Beyond demonstrating slavery's importance to Britain, however, what can visitors take from the database? Digital humanities projects often struggle to make their applications clear, and the *LBS* site has not yet fully resolved that problem either. It absolutely orients itself to face a broad public. There is a blog – dormant for nearly two years as of September 2017 – with posts on educational workshops about the database, short research articles, information on fact-finding trips, genealogical searches, conference presentations, and more. Newsletters give periodic updates on public talks related to the database, and there is also a frank discussion about the site's potential to undercut demands for reparations as well as concerns over the ethnic makeup of the researchers. Moreover, the *LBS* team asks for public contributions to build out the narratives of its subjects. In many ways, then, this feels like a living, dynamic website, and not simply an ossified electronic inventory. But it is also unclear where one should begin when logging on. The easiest first step would be to search through surnames, to see if there was any record of slave ownership in a family tree. That is simple and important enough, and likely many Britons – and others – have learned some disturbing truths. Genealogists may also find the *LBS* incredibly helpful at sketching out the economic histories, and not just the names, of relatives. Equally, it is quite dramatic to look at the map provided of Britain to see not only that the cities of London, Liverpool, and Bristol were awash in slave money, but that so too were Londonderry, Leeds, and Bangor.

Yet the space between the hyper-specificity of an individual record of compensation and the broad image of total distributions on a map is a substantial gulf that is not easily spanned here. It is hard to imagine, for example, how one might aggregate portions of the data on the site. Although the records can be narrowed through the ‘search’ function, there is not yet an ability to create any kind of graph or visualization of the results. This is, in part, a consequence of the type of data being offered, as each remuneration record is highly idiosyncratic. However, a number of possibilities for charts can be imagined: correlations between ages of recipients and amount of money obtained, comparisons of gender and reinvestment practices, assessments of recipients’ religious affiliations and choice of business ventures, links between islands and certain British counties, etc. Each of these might provide more insight into the larger patterns of financial redistribution that came out of emancipation. The *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* could serve as a model for the type of potential aggregations that can be made for the *LBS* database.⁽⁶⁾ Again, for some genealogists and curious visitors looking for specific people and estates, this may not be a problem. But for others, especially undergraduates interested in using the database for analytical research and even for academics undertaking their own studies, the site does not lend itself easily to broad assessments

Considering the political implications of this database, it is unsurprising that the *LBS* site is rather conservative in its explicit argumentation, or even perhaps in its reticence to enable data aggregation. Fortunes are easily traced from slavery to the families and firms still living and operating in Britain today. Bearing in mind current calls in the West Indies for reparations, the exact destination of slave-derived capital is both valuable, and also controversial, information. In some ways, little more needs to be stated than simply cataloging that transfer of expropriated wealth. Yet, the site also runs the risk of turning off visitors with such a monumental cache of raw data. It would be highly beneficial to have a handful of formal essays – and not just short blog posts – analyzing the sources so as to guide, or at least give more context to, those who log on; again, the *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* could give some inspiration here.⁽⁷⁾ At the same time, however, all digital humanities projects face this challenge of balancing between offering too much and too little interpretation. For smaller databases, the sources can effectively stand on their own. For a repository as deep and rich as this one, more roadmaps are needed.

Despite these critiques, the *LBS* database is a tremendous resource and tool for the history of slavery, the West Indies, Britain, and the Atlantic World. It facilitates a deep dive into the dark history of coerced labor and British finances. Moreover, the database allows its visitors to move beyond an abstracted sense of slavery. Recent debates in the field have called into question the effect of digital and historical scholarship that has privileged numerical assessments of slavery over the individual, human experience.⁽⁸⁾ Although this abstraction has long been a problem for those who were enslaved, it has been something of an issue for those who benefited from slavery as well. The *LBS* database shows in rich detail that the profits from human bondage did not simply scatter into a depersonalized capitalist system. Rather, they went directly into thousands of individual pocketbooks, business accounts, and physical structures. The site removes the anonymity of that profit to clarify the specific history of slavery. In the ensuing years, it may do the same for those who produced such abundant wealth. For now, though, it opens up the enormous and complicated world of plantation slavery to public scrutiny, and asks us to look unflinchingly at the sight.

Notes

1. Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2016); *Emancipation and the Remaking of the British Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, and Keith McClelland (Manchester, 2014).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1945).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Judith Philip, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* <<http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/11042> [2]> [accessed 2 September 2017]. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Charles Richard Bigge, *ibid.* <<http://www.depts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/18565> [3]> [accessed 2 September 2017].[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. James Auchinleck Cheyne', *ibid.* <<http://wwwdepts-live.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/46785> [4]> [accessed 2 September 2017]; 'Life Insurance Company of Scotland', *ibid.* <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/firm/view/1115562888> [5]> [accessed 2 September 2017].[Back to \(5\)](#)
 6. *The Transatlantic Slave Trade Database* <<http://slavevoyages.org/voyage/search> [6]> [accessed 2 September 2017].[Back to \(6\)](#)
 7. Essays', *ibid.* <<http://slavevoyages.org/assessment/essays> [7]> [accessed 2 September 2017].[Back to \(7\)](#)
 8. Gregory E. O'Malley, 'Balancing the empirical and the humane in slave trade studies', *Uncommon Sense – The Blog*, 14 January 2015) <<https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/balancing-the-empirical-and-the-humane-in-slave-trade-studies/> [8]> [accessed 2 September 2017].[Back to \(8\)](#)
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[8] <https://blog.oieahc.wm.edu/balancing-the-empirical-and-the-humane-in-slave-trade-studies/>