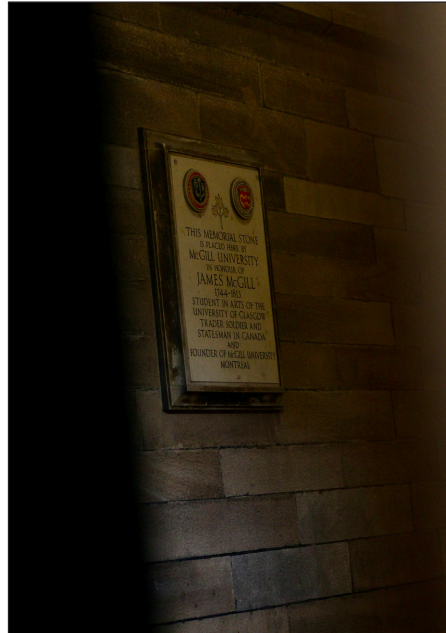


Cutting the ties that bound: the University of Glasgow and James McGill



Plaque honouring James McGill: Currently hidden behind 'Aspect: National Asbestos Abatement' construction equipment. Photo: Pawlu Caruana.



Spring breaks through at the University of Glasgow. Photo: Pawlu Caruana.

Pawlu Caruana
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These are the known names of enslaved people owned by James McGill. Before going to Canada, trading in slave produced goods, enslaved people and helping other wealthy people acquire slaves, McGill studied at the University of Glasgow in 1756. To many in Glasgow, though, the name may bring little to mind beyond the west Scotland bus service carrying the same name, and people they might personally know who have the fairly common surname. Others may recognise the name from McGill University, James McGill's namesake, in Montreal. The prestigious university has a reputation for being among Canada's best, proudly promoting itself as 'the Harvard of Canada.' McGill University honours the slave owner and trader who bequeathed part of his fortune to the Royal Institute for the Advancement of Learning to found a college.

Over several decades, McGill's University community has been embroiled in disputes over the McGill name, the financial conduct of the institution and campus culture. What is surprising is that a similar commemoration to James McGill can be found - unquestioned and unchallenged - in the University of Glasgow's iconic main building. One corner of the mesmerising cloisters is adorned with a plaque honouring a slave, located within 8 metres of the latest commemoration to be added to the picturesque scene. Inscribed on the newest plaque is a denunciation of Robert Bogle, a Glaswegian slave owner alive in the 18th to 19th centuries, who's house was located close to where the main building now stands. Through this plaque, UoG acknowledges that it was the beneficiary of donations from people who built their wealth through slavery. The plaque commemorates the lives of all those who suffered enslavement.

'Statues don't fall from the sky, people put them there'

There is an obvious contradiction inherent to the placement of these plaques. It is one which calls into question the commitment that UoG has made to reparative justice. The tacit honouring of a slaveowner, in the name of 'balance' can be interpreted in few ways other than being an ongoing commitment to colonial narratives which cemented the ideological foundations from which many nations have yet to liberate themselves. Wealth acquired through colonisation and enslavement has never been distributed equally amongst white people and people of colour. People of colour have largely been kept at the margins of society, suffering disproportionately from conditions of economic deprivation and, as recently exemplified by the COVID19 pan-

demic's unevenly distributed toll, increased health risks.

To the credit of UoG, the institution has proactively acknowledged its role in benefiting from donations acquired through the slave trade. It has acknowledged the ongoing inequalities which have resulted from that trade, the ideologies implemented and upheld to support it, and the world order it has left in its wake. In 2018, UoG commissioned a study 'investigating the University's links to historical slavery' according to Chief Operating Officer and University Secretary, David Duncan, who has occupied the role for just over 5 years. It was partially his responsibility 'to follow through on implementing the recommendations from the report.' When asked how action on those nine recommendations has progressed, Duncan answered 'We've pretty well implemented all of them, at least in part' before adding that 'I don't want to say that we've done the recommendations from the report, that's it, finished, we're onto the next thing. It's a kind of living issue, and something that we'll keep visiting.'

One such recommendation was that the University's new Learning Hub facility be named after James McCune Smith. After being born into enslavement, he worked to become the world's first African American man to receive a medical degree, and he did so at the University of Glasgow. Another recommendation from the report was the commissioning of the newest plaque. It has been displayed in the main building since August 2018, but it has been displayed directly beside one honouring James McGill - which absolutely does not acknowledge his ownership of enslaved people. It refers to him instead as a 'student, trader, soldier and statesman in Canada.' When asked if this placement struck him as hypocritical, Duncan responded 'I don't think it's hypocritical. I mean I think that our view on it is that it is right to recognise different aspects of the university's history, and different aspects of that history will mean different things to different people. That means doing it in a warts and all way.'

Representatives of Divest McGill, a Montreal based activist group striving fervently towards democratization and fossil fuel divestment at McGill University, made an important distinction. "There's recognising and discussing history and there's glorifying and romanticising it. If you have a plaque that's a very clear dedication in honour of him, that's a very different thing to having one discussing his involvement in enslaving individuals," said Thalia, 22. Duncan was clear to emphasise that the university website acknowledges his role and a bio page on the university's website does acknowledge that as a 'Montreal-based merchant, McGill traded in Caribbean tropical, slave produced, plantation goods' as well as becoming 'a slaveowner and helping other wealthy individuals procure slaves.' Laura, 22, another member of Divest, added the important dimension of placement. "The placement of recognitions is very important. I'm personally in favour of museums or nothing. This is something my dad said the other day that I really liked. 'Statues didn't fall from the sky, people put them there.'"

The argument that the plaque honouring McGill is a recognition of history and that the only alternative is 'hiding it' ignores a multitude of alternatives such as modification or amendment. It also refuses to acknowledge that the principal implication of a commemoration 'in honour' of a figure is not about recognising history. It is a celebration of that figure. The website can and should acknowledge wrongdoing, but if the physical commemoration is not accompanied by equally physical contextual clues explaining that wrongdoing. If assessing those necessitates further research on the

university's website, it stands to reason that limited information on the foregrounded commemoration will be the primary takeaway for observers. Carley, 22, added commemorations are a choice. The choice to put them there in the first place was as political as the choice to remove them, or move them, would be.

'McGill University causes violence to a lot of people'

Choices made around these commemorations are always politically charged. Discussing the placement of the two plaques, and the wording of the most recent dedication to the victims of enslavement, Duncan said that 'hopefully there is some balance there by having the other plaque, which is very carefully worded.' Putting aside objections to the idea of the importance of 'balance' when it comes to the issue of slavery, Duncan's explanation about the process of drafting the new plaque was interesting. 'I had thought that Robert Bogle had given money to the University. He didn't, actually. He died by 1819, a long time before the University was built here.' Beyond the link between the University's location and the location of Robert Bogle's former house, 'he really had no historical connection to the University.' This was an interesting choice.

While the university could have chosen to list the name of one of the many people who made money through slavery and did give money to the university, they chose not to. "We used that as the hook to draw attention to the fact that the university had links with slavery of one sort or another."

A more powerful statement might have been to list the name of an actual donor on the plaque, rather than going with an otherwise unaffiliated proximity based choice. But at least the University is drawing attention to this history. Even imperfectly, this is progress. Duncan referred to the connected *Understanding Racism, Transforming University Cultures* report published in 2020. "There is a relationship between race equality issues today and how they affect current members of the university community and that whole historical slavery issue. We've tried to apply some of the same principles. Some of the lessons we learned from this historical issue are what we're trying to apply to racial issues as they affect people today and will do in years to come."

Whilst describing the work done by Divest McGill over the past decade, it became apparent that comparatively speaking, UoG's initiative in taking responsibility and committing to reparative justice for its role as a beneficiary of the slave trade is far preferable to McGill's stance. According to Carley, McGill has adopted a strategy of 'trying to make us die out, in some way or another' by refusing to engage and ignoring popular demands. Referencing Divest McGill's recent occupation of the arts building on campus, she continued 'Even though we're doing something which is not allowed on campus, they're just like 'No. We don't care, just let them finish and when they're done, nothing will change.' It is significantly easier to accept the actions of a proactive administration which is seeking to implement its idea of 'good' than it is to have one which has resorted to ghosting its own community. While UoG is 'on track to divest fully by 2025' according to Duncan, at McGill, students like Laura are left - following Harvard's decision to divest from fossil fuels

- asking 'If we're the Harvard of Canada, can we also divest? Please?'

The approach taken by McGill's administration is callous and undemocratic. UoG's anti-slavery and anti-racist initiatives show promise, yet issues like the persistent UCU workers strikes, and the endowment's investments in arms and avionic companies despite popular support for putting an end to violent and exploitative practices from within the campus community, indicate that democratization may be needed at UoG too. The difference is that those in power here are more finely attuned to popular sentiment than are their counterparts at McGill.

When asked 'what does the McGill name mean to you?' Laura answered that 'for me and for a lot of other black or indigenous students on campus it is violent.' The reminder of James McGill's ownership of enslaved people is jarring, even given the extent of McGill University's callousness. Despite this, according to Laura, Divest McGill members have been 'reticent to ask for a name change because it might mean using funds which could be used elsewhere. No one is opposed to a name change if other things like increasing the

'No. We don't care, just let them finish and when they're done, nothing will change.'

number of black profs, or creating an Indigenous studies major, happen. If we have to choose, lets make it the other demands before the name change.' This was largely explained when, citing weapons investments, fossil fuel commitments and that the institution stands on stolen lands, they added: 'Regardless of the name that it has, McGill University causes violence to a lot of people, especially racialised people.' The immediate pursuit of mitigating, or altogether ending that violence, is being prioritised.

C.O.O. David Duncan explained that while there are 'no immediate plans' to take down, modify or in some way amend the plaque honouring James McGill, doing so is not out of the question. "What we might do with the plaque, and I'm not saying that we would never amend it in some way, but my personal view is that we should wait to see what happens at McGill University in Montreal first." Duncan was clear about the importance of never saying never on issues like these, however, based on Divest McGill's encounters with McGill University Administration, it is not evident that there is a high likelihood of McGill University making such a change in the near future. While it is certainly important to acknowledge UoG's history, it is unclear what the benefit of honouring McGill is to the University of Glasgow's pursuit of historical transparency, especially considering that it may mean reasserting a commitment to violence.

Recently, Glasgow city council published a report to examine the city's connections to slavery. According to the Guardian's reporting, council leader Susan Aitken told colleagues that following 'Atlantic slavery money trails' found that 'its tentacles reach into every corner of Glasgow.' The city's investigation has culminated in an apology for the city's role in the slave trade, a legacy which can be witnessed in the names of over 60 city streets, such as Buchanan and Glassford. Andrew Buchanan and John Glassford owned tobacco plantations, powered by a massive enslaved workforce. The city has committed to acknowledging, apologising and acting. What that action will look like is as yet unclear, but regardless of the form it takes, Glasgow and the U.K. must recognise the impossibility of separating contemporary beneficial developments and wealth from horrifically ill-begotten foundations. While initiatives to lesson racial disparities are positive, and the genuine pursuit of social equity is commendable, there is cause to examine the underlying economic systems at play. The priorities which encouraged humans to turn against humans centuries ago, and call them inhuman, to justify their subjugation and enslavement, are the same priorities which compel humans to ravage and exploit the planet, its resources and one another today. Initiatives for reparative justice can be sweeping, and well meaning, but living histories cannot be undone. Our commitment to an economic system rooted in principles of exploitative ownership and perpetual growth can be.

In the meantime, perhaps, the University of Glasgow could take its lead from members of McGill's student body, the Black Student Network and the Indigenous Student Alliance, who collaborated to produce a two-pronged project called *Forgotten Names*. They have shone a light on four names, and one which has unfortunately been lost to the cruelty of a brutal history, which are significantly more deserving of commemoration than is James McGill.

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The latest commemoration to be unveiled at Glasgow. Photo: Pawlu Caruana.