

Melville Monument will tell the true story of Henry Dundas

Although a committee was formed two years ago and more to draft the wording of a plaque for the Melville Monument, it has taken the momentum from Black Lives Matter protests after the death of George Perry Floyd in Minneapolis to allow the parties involved to come to an agreement.

Earlier this week Council Leader Adam McVey said that it would be done and it may be, if the council's Policy and Sustainability Committee pass the motion tomorrow. A plaque will then be added relating the story of the connection between Dundas and the slave trade.

The wording will be as follows:

Addendum 8.2 to the Policy and Sustainability Committee 11 June 2020 to the Motion on Black Lives Matter by Councillor Cammy Day:

"Notes that the Council facilitated the convening of an independent Panel, following a petition in 2016 to the then, Culture and Sport Committee", to agree wording for a plaque at St Andrew Square more accurately reflecting the history of Henry Dundas".

Notes this panel met and agreed an approach but didn't manage to come to a consensus view to agree final wording for Council approval.

Notes a meeting was held on 9th June 2020 between the Council Leader, Depute Leader and panel member Sir Geoff Palmer to agree final wording. This meeting also had input from Edinburgh World Heritage, Edinburgh University (who checked details with academics) and Cllr Wilson (as relevant Convener and former panel member as Lord Provost) and Cllr McNeese-Mechan as relevant Vice-Convener.

Notes positive engagement has taken place with the owners of St Andrew Square to install a new plaque swiftly.

Committee agrees that the text below is an appropriate and accurate description and requests the Director of Place continues engagement with the owners to find the most appropriate place for this on-site to help tell Edinburgh's story.

"On the plinth at the centre of St Andrew Square stands a neoclassical column with a statue at the top. This represents Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742 – 1811). He was the Scottish Lord Advocate and an MP for Edinburgh and Midlothian, and the First Lord of the Admiralty. Dundas was a contentious figure, provoking controversies that resonate to this day. While Home Secretary in 1792 and first Secretary of State for War in 1796 he was instrumental in deferring the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Slave trading by British ships was not abolished until 1807. As a result of this delay, more than half a million enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic. Dundas also curbed democratic dissent in Scotland.

Dundas both defended and expanded the British empire, imposing colonial rule on indigenous peoples. He was impeached in the United Kingdom for misappropriation of public money and although acquitted, he never held public office again. Despite this, the monument before you to Henry Dundas was funded by voluntary contribution from officers, petty officers, seamen and marines and erected in 1821, with the statue placed on top in 1827.

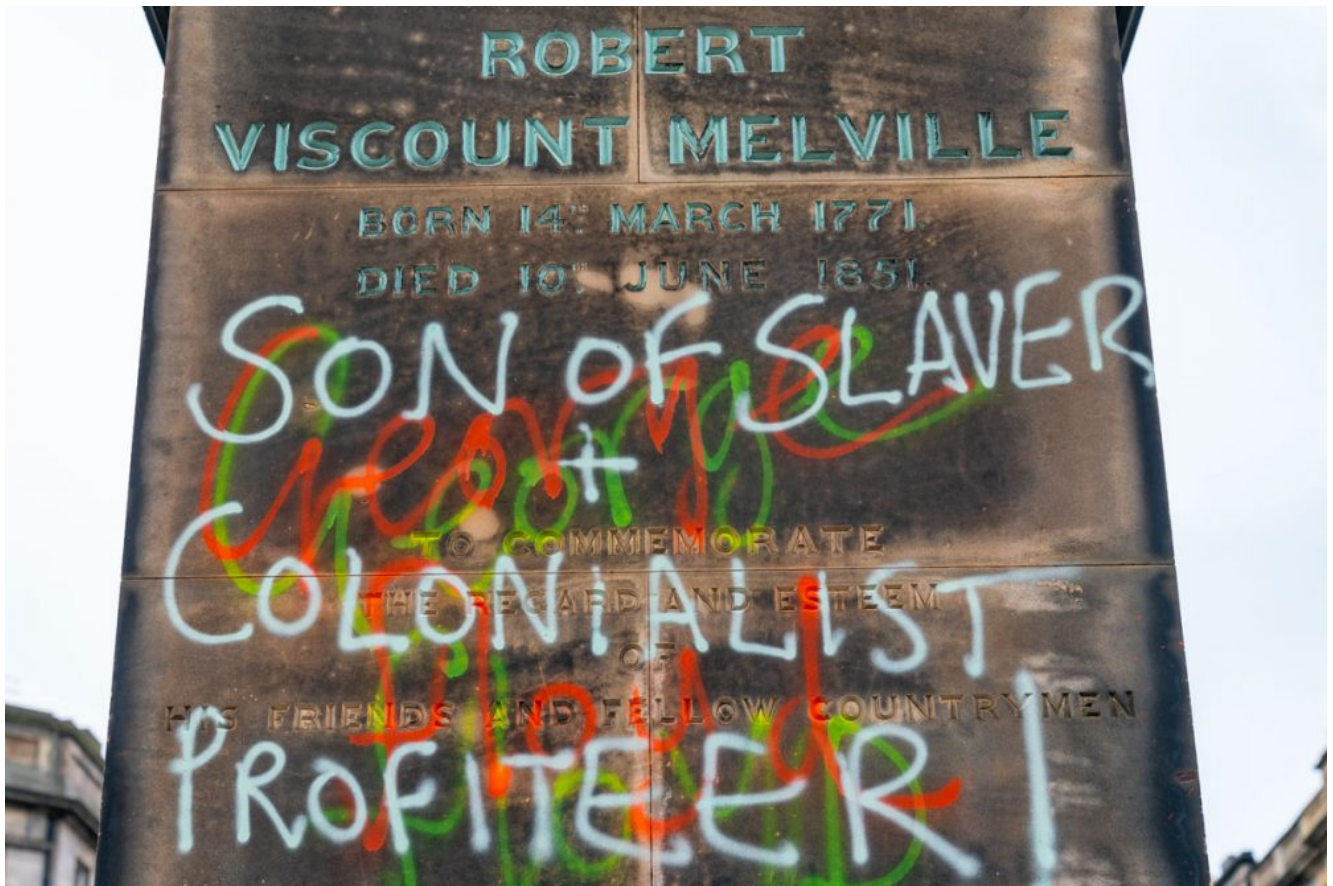
In 2020 this was dedicated to the memory of the more than half a million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas's actions."

Council Leader Adam McVey said: "This discussion will rightly continue and it's important to listen to black and ethnic minority voices in our City in that discussion. This is only one step of many in helping us talk about, understand and confront our history. It's not the first step, and won't be the last, but an important one nonetheless and I'm hopeful the committee will support this way forward.

"I know there are many who would remove these statues and I know there are those, like Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, who say 'if you remove the evidence, you remove the deed'. We need to make sure any steps we take serve to educate and highlight all sides of Edinburgh's story – the good and the bad. We should not hide from that. It's important to also recognise the issues we have now and in understanding our history, we can help tackle prejudice in Edinburgh in 2020."

Since the weekend's protests graffiti was added to the base of the Melville Monument in St Andrew Square, although swiftly removed by council workers. The statue of Henry Dundas is atop the 150 foot column. Dundas was a lawyer and is described as a gradual abolitionist of slavery. Listen to our podcasts with Sir Geoff Palmer below to discover more of Edinburgh's links to slavery.

A second statue was defaced by Tuesday morning of Henry Dundas's son, Robert 2nd Viscount Melville.



Robert Viscount Melville. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com

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Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville looks out over St Andrew Square. PHOTO Martin P McAdam