

Group apply for permission to have plaque removed from Melville statue

A group arguing that a new plaque at the foot of Edinburgh's Melville Monument is not historically accurate has applied for planning permission to have it removed.

Installed after the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement sparked calls for the removal of the Henry Dundas statue, which sits atop a 150-ft column in St Andrew Square, the plaque was reworded to present a more nuanced account of the life and work of the prominent 18th century politician by highlighting his role in delaying the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade.

The wording, agreed by council leaders, heritage experts and Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, who has since completed a slavery and colonialism legacy review for The City of Edinburgh Council, states that Dundas was "instrumental" in deferring abolition with "more than half a million enslaved Africans crossing the Atlantic" as a result.

However, some academics dispute this view and argue that pinning the blame on Dundas ignores other factors which were in play at the time.

Research published by one of the most high-profile sceptics, history academic Angela McCarthy, forms part of a bid to have the new plaque taken down.

An application for listed building consent lodged with the council by the “Melville Monument Committee” – a limited company registered in Carnwath – is set to be considered after being validated by planning officers on 8 September.

The group, which goes by the longer name of the Committee On The Naval Monument To The Memory of The Late Lord Viscount Melville Ltd, said they think the wording on the plaque “is inappropriate and does not provide a factual description of Henry Dundas history”.

Two of McCarthy’s academic papers published earlier this year are included in the planning documents, one looking at the former Home Secretary’s role in delaying slave trade abolition, and another titled ‘Historians, Activists and Britain’s Slave Trade Abolition Debate: The Henry Dundas Plaque Debacle’.

In it, McCarthy wrote that Professor Palmer has “repeatedly misrepresented the published views of historians and historical evidence and failed to accept the current historiographical and academic consensus that Henry Dundas was not solely responsible for Britain’s failure to achieve immediate abolition of its slave trade”.

Palmer, who is an Professor Emeritus at Heriot-Watt University, recently recommended that new plaques are installed at all statues, monuments and street names linked to slavery and colonialism in the capital to explain their historical context.

He said the process is “not about erasing history” but rather “presenting a fuller picture that enables us all to better understand who we are, and how this history influenced the development of Edinburgh itself”.

Professor Palmer has been named as the recipient of the [Edinburgh Award](#) 2022.

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter

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HENRY DUNDAS

1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811)

At the top of this neoclassical column stands a statue of Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811). He was the Scottish Lord Advocate, 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, and 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 was funded by voluntary contributions from British naval officers, petty officers, seamen, and marines and was erected in 1821, with the statue placed on top in 1827.

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

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Henry Dundas temporary plaque was replaced with a permanent version. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com



Henry Dundas, plaque. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
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