

Sir Geoff will be honoured today

Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, OBE, will be inducted into Scotland's highest royal ancient order later today.

He was awarded the position which is in the personal gift of HRH the King, and while he says he is pleased, the gentle professor says it is wholly down to the work and kindness of others.

The installation ceremony for Palmer and other inductees is to take place on 3 July at St. Giles' Cathedral, and the honour brings with it the right to have his own coat of arms.

Sir Geoff is Chancellor of Heriot-Watt University and a university spokesperson said: "This honour recognises Sir Geoff's significant contributions to national life and public service."

Born in St Elizabeth, Jamaica and raised by his aunts, he came to the UK to join his mother when he was just 15. It was his mother who advised him later from a "very Jamaican and Windrush generation standpoint" to accept the first honour of OBE. She said to Geoff then: "They have never given us anything in the past because they think we weren't worth it.

Now they think you're worth it – so take it.”

As for this most recent honour he finds it striking that he is a recipient some three centuries after the Order was established by James VII. He said: “In 1697 the Royal African Company existed. The company bought and sold slaves, probably including some of my ancestors. I am sure James VII never imagined that a black person would receive this great honour.”

Sir Geoff is a known activist in the areas of slavery and colonialism. He was very gracious saying it was a result of The Edinburgh Reporter video of his speech during the Black Lives Matter campaign in 2020 that the discussion of slavery in the capital was progressed by the council.

He claims it was after watching the video from that day that Adam McVey, then council leader, contacted him to discuss the possibility of rewriting a new memorial plaque to put at the base of the Melville monument in St Andrew Square. Whether or not that is the case, the debate has certainly moved on. Sir Geoff has been instrumental, drawing on his own life story and his knowledge as a researcher to inform the debate particularly on Henry Dundas.

But it has not been without opposition from other academics. He counters those who tell him he is wrong by pointing out the importance of research and the truth. He said: “I was taught how to do research. I came from Leicester University where I got my first degree. I was trained in research at Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt. I looked at Dundas and at the Scottish history. Others have not for example quoted Pitt the Prime Minister who said Dundas was a gradual abolitionist “prescribing some condition, waiting for some contingency, or by refusing to proceed, till a thousand favourable circumstances unite together”. And gradual abolition meant never. There are similarities with climate change today.”

The emeritus professor was not sure at first that he would

need a coat of arms on his “stall” in the Thistle Chapel in St Giles’. But The Lord Lyon King of Arms, Dr Joseph Morrow, confirmed that all knights and ladies are assigned this space. He said: “It’s normal practice that the stall plate which consists of a person’s coat of arms is put on that specific stall. All the plates stay there so giving the history of all those who have been knights or ladies in that particular stall.

“It doesn’t have to be in place by the time of the investiture but Sir Geoff, in common with anyone else wanting a coat of arms, will have to petition me to have a suitable one created.

“As he is at the very top of our honours system in Scotland he is also entitled to two “supporters” – these are the two beasts or animals on either side of the shield. The process does not take long and usually the stall plate is placed in the chapel within a few months of the investiture.”

The Thistle Chapel is a Robert Lorimer design completed in 1911. Above the 16 stalls for the Knights of the Thistle (as well as two others for the Sovereign and two other members of the royal family) there are heraldic shields with the Sovereign’s being the most ornate.

The renowned academic and longtime Edinburgh resident said that the ancient order, restarted by King James VII in 1687, has included few members of African descent throughout its 300+ year history.

As the first African member, Sir Geoff Palmer’s admission into the Order of the Thistle marks a watershed moment for Scotland in continuing to reckon with its complicated imperial past.

Palmer, who was previously knighted by Queen Elizabeth II, shared his profound appreciation for this latest accolade. “It is an example that we should continue to work for change for the better,” he stated. The Jamaican-born professor noted the

profound irony that the same King James VII who revived the Order of the Thistle also enabled the slave trade through the Royal African Company during his reign.

While admission to the order represents a prestigious achievement, Palmer remains humble. "All the credit goes to the people who've helped me," he remarked, "Especially my mother." He credited his upbringing for instilling the values that guided his impactful career.

Palmer has said much in the last few years on the controversy surrounding a statue of Henry Dundas in St Andrew Square, claiming that Dundas purposefully delayed the abolition of slavery. He said: "Dundas wanted to continue slavery for economic reasons," Palmer asserted.

The following announcement was made in March :

THE KING has been graciously pleased to make the following appointments within the Most Ancient and Most Noble Order of the Thistle:

His Royal Highness The Prince Edward, Duke of Edinburgh, KG, GCV0 to be a Royal Knight of the Order.

The Right Honourable the Baroness Black of Strome, DBE to be a Lady of the Order

The Right Honourable the Baroness Kennedy of The Shaws, KC to be a Lady of the Order

Sir Godfrey (Geoff) Palmer, OBE to be a Knight Brethren of the

Order



Professor Sir Geoff Palmer Honorary President of ELREC speaking at the Black Lives Matter gathering in 2020. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com