Perspectives


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The name of William Wilberforce is associated with the campaign and legislation to abolish the British slave trade in 1807. The bicentenary of this legislation in 2007 has provided an opportunity to commemorate it and to highlight the unfinished business. Given his birthplace in Hull, this has encouraged the city to organise a programme of events to mark and commemorate the above. Inevitably, in highlighting the iconic role of an individual in the anti-slavery process, there is always the potential danger that ‘the big picture’ can suffer and the contribution and sufferings of many people over many years can be overshadowed (Adi, 2007). However, the bicentenary has created new opportunities locally and beyond to recall and promote historical episodes of slave resistance and emancipation and remind us that Wilberforce’s campaign was an important part – but not the beginning or the end - of the global movement against slavery. The city council and local organisers and participants have aspired to utilise their ‘ownership’ and narrative of Wilberforce to act as a catalyst for civil society, politicians and others to continue the struggle against all forms of slavery at home and afar. Indeed, the considerable public and media interest generated by the Wilberforce events help to illustrate the global resonance retained by the campaign and its association with human agency as a vehicle for wider social justice and equality.

The programme of events has been quite ambitious, incorporating a wide range of initiatives (see http://www.wilberforce2007.com), including music, theatre, dance, storytelling, lectures, workshops, exhibitions, marches, readings, carnival, film, fair-trade festival, community initiatives and other social and cultural activities. Development education has figured prominently in the events. For instance, the Development Education Centre (Hull) (Dechull@dechull.karoo.co.uk), an educational charity, which specialises in diversity, social justice and fair trading issues aimed, through
its Young Campaigners Project, to link Wilberforce’s campaign to modern campaigning issues such as trade justice and modern slavery. Indeed, this has been the approach of prominent NGOs such as Anti-Slavery International, the Refugee Council and Amnesty International, with the emphasis on the reality that slavery of different kinds is a feature of contemporary society, for instance in the form of trafficked sex-slaves and bonded labour. The Development Education Centre (Hull) hopes to encourage young campaigners to develop skills to enable them to become the seasoned campaigners of the future in order to contest contemporary injustices. Development education projects include the Schools Video Project, designed to encourage secondary school students to engage creatively and audio-visually with the issues of the bicentenary such as modern slavery, social justice and campaigning for change, and the Citizenship and Diversity Project aimed at engaging post-16 educational providers and young people in student-led initiatives under the rubric of citizenship. Hull Museum Education too has been at the forefront in creating 14 new learning programmes for schools in connection with the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery legislation. These programmes, aimed at embedding the study of slavery (past and present) into the curriculum, have had a big take up within local schools and are also supported by online learning.

Unsurprisingly, music has featured too in the overall programme of events, including performance and workshops by African musicians, the London Gospel Choir and Rock Against Racism performers. In one workshop project for instance, the focus is on music from West Africa, with the intention of bringing together refugees, asylum seekers, young adults and secondary school pupils – under the musical guidance of Gambian-born tutor Seikou Susso – in order to learn how to play and perform with African musical instruments. Another workshop sought to bring the same target groups together in order to focus on choral music and share performances with renowned opera singers of African/Afro-Caribbean origin. Also on the music front, a poster and postcard initiative sought to recall Hull’s grassroots contribution to Rock Against Racism, twenty-five years ago. This particular initiative, in August 2007, was part of a diversity and resistance weekend of live music linked into the broader Love Music Hate Racism movement. In addition, a publication associated with these particular projects contained moving accounts by contemporary political asylum seekers in the city and those facing racism on the streets, including members of the local Kurdish community. Theatre too has made contributions to the programme, including contributions from the well-known Hull Truck Youth Theatre, street theatre activity and an ambitious multi-media theatre event focused on
criminality and slavery across the globe.

The events have provided the city with an occasion to develop its longstanding links with Freetown, Sierra Leone, with which Hull is twinned. For instance, a photography project emanating from Hull Women’s Centre involved visits to Freetown with the aspiration of strengthening links and solidarity between the two towns. Another initiative aimed to deliver to Sierra Leone five four-wheel drive vehicles equipped to provide humanitarian relief. The city council, in fact, points to over twenty-five years of linkage with Freetown and claims to have been the first European city to have constructed such a twinning relationship with a city from the developing world.

Also of note is the work of the Wilberforce Institute for the Study of Slavery and Emancipation (WISE) (http://www.hull.ac.uk/wise), a new (2006) institution attached to the University of Hull, located off campus in the old town, adjacent to the revamped Wilberforce House (birthplace, educational centre and museum). The Institute is dedicated to the study of the history and contemporary manifestations of slavery and emancipation. For instance, in 2007, a group of researchers from WISE combined with others from Anti-Slavery International to produce the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded report Contempory Slavery in the UK: Overview and Key Issues. As the title illustrates, the report focuses on the existence of slavery in the UK today, and it reviews the forms this modern slavery takes, such as trafficking of women and children for sexual or domestic labour, forced labour or debt bondage. WISE Patron Archbishop Desmond Tutu further highlighted the theme of modern slavery in his keynote lecture in Hull in May 2007. The authors of the above report contend that, despite the legal abolition of the slave trade, thousands of people are working in the UK at present in enslaved conditions. These include migrant workers working in highly exploitative conditions, one of the most notorious examples here being the Chinese cockle pickers who died in Morecambe Bay in 2004.

An informative article by Emily Dugan (2007) picked up on themes outlined in the above report. According to Dugan, recent studies had outlined the extent of child trafficking yet, contends Debbie Aroyo (Africans Unite Against Child Abuse), convictions of perpetrators have not been forthcoming. Home Office minister Vernon Coaker accepted that the Government still had a long way to go in tackling the issue of trafficked children, despite a UK Action Plan on Tackling Human Trafficking – and the creation of the UK Human Trafficking Centre in 2006. Part of the focus of human rights campaigners in 2007 – including a coalition of organisations such as Save the Children and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty against Children (NSPCC) - has been upon getting the UK
Government to up the ante in this respect. The campaign to get the Government to sign the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings succeeded on 23 March 2007. The next stage though is ratification in order to enhance provision of (at least) minimum standards of protection for victims of trafficking, including for example access to specialist and adequately resourced support services, such as counselling, medical help and legal advice. Again, as with all legislation and action plans, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, the implementation.

A key message of the 2007 commemoration then is that very much remains to be done, locally, nationally and globally to address legal shortfalls and enhance the enforcement of existing legal protections in respect to exploitative labour practices and slavery. Like elsewhere, events in Hull will have played their part and will have contributed hopefully to the eradication of some negative attitudes towards migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and minority ethnic people within the city. In this context, in 2005, another report (written by one of the authors of the above mentioned Rowntree report) had offered sobering thoughts for the city, pointing inter alia to ‘casualised acceptance of racist behaviour and language among a significant part of the population, which occasionally becomes very explicit, violent and offensive’ and to the failure of agencies to sufficiently address problems of racism. On the positive side, the report also claimed that the situation ‘was being addressed and is beginning to be turned around’ and that significant developments had taken place recently in this respect (Craig, 2005:18-20). The 2007 programme of events therefore can be seen as a welcome, laudable, landmark - a continuation and acceleration of this process of coming to terms with the past, present and future.

Slavery is an issue that, given its prevalence, can and should form part of development education practice. The Wilberforce programme of events has challenged the notion that slavery is an issue consigned to our past and re-opened the debate on contemporary forms of slavery and how they should be challenged. Integrating slavery into development education practice can support further learning on the issue and encourage action that strengthens the legislative and enforcement frameworks for its eradication.

Sources/Bibliography


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