

Christ's College Legacies of Enslavement

Report: Ralph Bernal.¹

Introduction

The most important find during this summer's research session was a pair of silver candlesticks which form part of the Christ's Master's silver collection. They were donated by an alumnus, Ralph Bernal, and represent the first material evidence of the legacy of enslavement uncovered within the walls of the College. The definition of legacy I will be using here is borrowed from the recent University College London project on the Legacies of Slavery, where it refers both the direct financial connections with slavery, the products of those financial connections, and also the activities of their descendants too.² Ralph Bernal was a politician and collector who also owned estates in the Caribbean and was awarded thousands of pounds in compensation upon the abolition of slavery in 1833. This report aims to explore Ralph Bernal, his context and his life, and to discuss this legacy and what it may mean going forward.

Ralph Bernal and his world

Ralph Bernal was born in 1783, and died 1854. Born in Colchester to Jacob Israel Bernal and his wife Lea de Silva, his parents were Sephardi Jews from Spain and Portugal who were an active part of the Bevis Marks synagogue until 1744.³ Ralph

¹ This work would not have been possible without the people I must thank here. First thanks must go, of course, to Christ's College, for commissioning and funding the work of myself and fellow interns this summer. The Fellow of Christ's, Dr Helen Pfeifer, Dr Felix Waldmann, who oversaw this project from inception to finalization at different points must be thanked. Additionally, thanks are owed to the Christ's College Archivist, Dr Genny Silvanus. Without her, there would have been no project to speak of, and in particular I thank her for uncovering the Silver Register which contained the candlesticks so pivotal to this report. I am grateful also to the whole library team, in particular John Wagstaff, who was so patient with me when I was setting up the exhibition which followed the findings of this report. I also must thank Dr Sabine Cadeau, who gave invaluable comments on this report at multiple points in its development. For the exhibition, I must thank Professor Carrie Vout, and also Dr Silvanus again, for reading through the captions for the cases. And finally, I must thank my partner, Eoin Carter, who acted as my bedrock, in both life and in the world of 19th century history, for reading so many drafts of this report, and supporting me throughout.

² Hall (2016: 3).

³ Roth (1950: 78).

Bernal was reportedly circumcised according to Jewish custom, but later converted to Christianity in 1805.⁴

His father, Jacob Israel Bernal was a merchant with interests in the Caribbean, which he would later pass on to his son.⁵ This consisted of three sugar plantations in Jamaica: Cherry Garden, Edinburgh Castle, and Richmond. Sugar plantations like these used enslaved labourer to harvest sugarcane to feed the surging demand for sugar of the British public.⁶

With the money from the plantations, Jacob Israel Bernal was able to pay for his son to have an elite British education. The matriculation register of the College reports that Ralph Bernal was tutored by Revd John Hewlett at Shacklewell before he went up to Christ's College, Cambridge in 1802.⁷ The candlesticks which were discovered identified Bernal as *huius collegii socius commensalis anno domini 1802*, a "Fellow Commoner of this College in the year 1802." A Fellow Commoner was the highest rank of student, who paid their own fees and commons, rather than receiving some form of scholarship or working to pay for their studies.⁸ This is also noted in the matriculation register, where Bernal's admission fee was listed as £1: more than two months wages for a skilled labourer at the time. There are also College rent charges from 1802- 1809 which record that Ralph Bernal was being charged three shillings a term for renting a study of his own, all paid by his father.⁹ Ralph Bernal was not unusual in that his studies were funded through the profits of slavery.¹⁰ Many students would have had their fees paid by parents who worked in industries including everything from trade to cotton, to insurance, which would have enabled them to pay for their son's elite educations. What does mark Bernal out as unusual is the extent to which it is possible to track the breadth and depth of the impact which that money had on his life.

⁴ Bernal (2012: 101). It bears noting that this book was written by Ralph Bernal's descendent, Martin Bernal, a Sinologist most famous for the ground-breaking and controversial book *Black Athena* (1987), which explored the Afro-Asiatic roots of Classical civilisation. He was also the son of famed physicist and communist J.D. Bernal. Both father and son, like their ancestor, studied at Cambridge, although neither at Christ's College.

⁵ *Will of Jacob Israel Bernal of Fitzroy Square , Middlesex*, National Archives, PROB 11/1527/178.

⁶ See Dunn (1972: 188- 223).

⁷ Matriculation Register 1802, Christ's College Muniment Room.

⁸ Definition from Cambridge University Library glossary: <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/university-archives/glossary/fellow-commoner> [accessed 20/10/2021].

⁹ Rent charges book, Christ's College Muniment Room.

¹⁰ As explored in Clementine Butler-Brown's paper also produced as part of this research project.

Ralph Bernal's conversion to Christianity in 1806 was likely motivated by his desire to marry his first wife, Anne Elizabeth White, who was a Christian. However, this conversion also enabled Bernal to graduate from Cambridge, something which Jewish students, who were permitted to attend the University, were still barred from at the time.¹¹ After he graduated, Bernal was called to the bar in 1810, and practised law until coming into his inheritance in 1811 upon the death of his father. This meant that Ralph Bernal now owned the aforementioned plantations in Jamaica, and used this newfound financial freedom to run for election, succeeding in 1818 as the Whig M.P. for Lincoln.¹² Bernal also later represented Rochester and Weymouth. These wins were made possible through lavish electoral campaigning which reportedly totalled to over £66,000 over the course of his career, approximately four million pounds in today's money.¹³

As an M.P., Bernal gave speeches in the House of Commons advocating for the rights of enslavers, at a time when popular support for abolition was growing.¹⁴ In a 1826 speech in Parliament responding to Henry Brougham, who would later be instrumental in passing the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, Bernal claimed that supporters of abolition displayed an "indiscreet haste", which would "produce a very injurious effect upon the whole property vested in the West Indian Colonies,"-- the enslaved themselves.¹⁵ To counter the concerns of prominent men like Bernal, the British government passed the Slave Compensation Act of 1837.¹⁶ This allowed former slave owners to claim compensation for the loss of enslaved individuals. Records show that Bernal claimed compensation for 564 individuals across his plantations, resulting payments totalling £11,460 1s 2d, worth over one million pounds in modern money.¹⁷ The enslaved themselves did not receive any financial compensation.

As noted in a biography of his son, Ralph Bernal Osborne, "it is not, however, so much as a politician, as from his judgement and taste in the collection of specimens

¹¹ See Roth (1942) for discussion of this and other prohibitions faced by Jewish students in British universities.

¹² 'Bernal, Ralph (1783-1854)' in History of Parliament Online available at <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/bernal-ralph-1783-1854> [accessed 16/10/2021].

¹³ Bagenal (1884: 4). Conversion according to www.measuringworth.com [accessed 20/10/2021].

¹⁴ For background, see Davis (1975: 23-39).

¹⁵ Bernal (1826: 3).

¹⁶ Hall (2016: 6).

¹⁷ According to measuringworth.com.

of mediaeval art that Mr. Bernal will be best remembered."¹⁸ Ralph Bernal was key to cementing the place of the decorative arts as collectable items in the 19th century.¹⁹ It was his collection, featuring decorative arts as well as more traditional Old Master's paintings, auctioned after his death, which went on to form a part of the founding collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, with over 700 items from his collection ending up in the museum.²⁰ Today, many museums around the world display items collected by Bernal, from the British Museum, the Getty, the Metropolitan Museum, and even the Fitzwilliam Museum here in Cambridge. The collection was of such importance that Henry Cole (of the Society of Arts) tried to persuade the British government to purchase it at the time of Bernal's death, although he was unsuccessful.²¹ Instead, the auction, held by Christies in March 1854, contained over 4000 lots, and eventually realised £70,000, nearly 7 million pounds in today's money.

In the preface of the catalogue of the auction, J. R Planche talks about the "perfection of [Bernal's] taste" as the *raison d'être* of the collection.²² However, there is another explanation for this vast collection of *objets d'art* which Bernal was able to collect. As the historian Dr Hannah Young has explored, while Bernal had purchased art objects before, his "collecting habit" really started in the mid-1830s, as evidenced by a series of correspondences with the art dealer John Coleman Isaac.²³ These letters indicate Bernal was beginning to seriously focus on gathering a collection of his own. It is likely that this is when Bernal would have donated the silver candlesticks to the College. While there has not yet been discovered any record of their donation, they appear in the Silver Register in 1845, before Bernal's death, and seem to fit with the emergence of his focus on decorative arts. This change in behaviour from his earlier

¹⁸ Bagenal (1884). This biography was commissioned by Ralph Bernal Osborne's son-in-law, William A. A. de Vere, Duke of St. Albans, after the death of Bernal Osborne.

¹⁹ E.g. Susanne Higgott (2016) on the rise of glass collecting in the UK claims that the sale of Bernal's collection was an "important landmark," and Henry Bohn's work, which republished the catalogue sale of Bernal's collection and one of the first list of maker's marks for porcelain, creating a culture of "connoisseurship" around the material.

²⁰ To quote Bernal's son, Ralph Bernal Osborne "it might almost be said that the South Kensington Museum [later the Victoria and Albert Museum] had its cradle in his house in Eaton Square." Bagenal (1884: 5).

²¹ V& A Research Guide (2019: 6)

²² *Catalogue of the celebrated collection of works of art, from the Byzantine period to that of Louis Seize, of that distinguished collector, Ralph Bernal, esq., deceased: also, of the beautiful decorative furniture and service of plate: which (by order of the executors) will be sold by auction, by Messrs. Christie & Manson, at the mansion ... commencing on Monday, March the 5th, 1855* 1855: 2).

²³ The correspondence is explored in Levy (2007); Levy and Moss (2002). Young (March 2021) draws the connection between the payments from the Slave Compensation Commission and Bernal's collecting.

habits coincided with both the end of the institution of slavery in the British Empire, and, more crucially, with when Bernal received payments from the Slave Compensation Commission, which are dated the 1835 and 1836 respectively. It should be noted that when Bernal received compensation for the enslaved on his plantations in the mid-1830s, he remained the sole owner of those plantations, and their profits, and the formerly enslaved were forced to remain on those plantations for a period of 4 to 6 years after their “freedom” to serve a period of “apprenticeship”.²⁴

This apprenticeship was little better than being enslaved, as reported by two Quaker visitors, Sturge and Harvey, who toured the West Indies to report on the conditions of such apprenticeships. In his 1826 speech, Bernal had claimed that the Colonial Legislatures had voluntarily passed laws for “the improvement and amelioration of the condition of the slave population”, which included physical punishment of the enslaved being limited to 39 lashes, the enslaved being given Sunday’s off, and that the Magistrate would now be prosecuted if overseers or slaveholders violated these new laws. However, these exact claims are roundly disproven Sturge and Harvey, who observed “the apprentices work from six to six, with intermissions of two hours and a half for breakfast and dinner. They have no half Fridays, no payment for extra labour, no salt fish, no field cooks. Invalids get no food, nor old people any support from the estate. Pregnant women are allowed no more time than on New Ground. They say it is useless to complain to the magistrate; “his hand shake so” that the overseer always has to write his sentences for him.” While the enslaved on Bernal’s plantations endured these conditions, Bernal continued to receive a steady income, and also received three lump payments of over £11,000 from the British Government.²⁵ The co-incidence of these two facts suggests that the compensation acted as a form of “seed capital” for Bernal’s collection, which spurred a practice which would last a lifetime.

As we have seen, Bernal’s legacy as a collector has often obscured his legacy as an enslaver. The artist Victoria Adukwei Bulley’s work aims to reconcile these two

²⁴ Draper (2013: 100 –7). The conditions of the formerly enslaved remained much the same too, as Sturge and Harvey report of Bernal’s Richmond plantation: “the apprentices work from six to six, with intermissions of two hours and a half for breakfast and dinner. They have no half Fridays, no payment for extra labour, no salt fish, no field cooks. Invalids get no food, nor old people any support from the estate. Pregnant women are allowed no more time than on New Ground. They say it is useless to complain to the magistrate; “his hand shake so” that the overseer always has to write his sentences for him.” Sturge and Harvey (2010: 395).

²⁵ Slave Compensation Commission: Compensation Claims Records: Parliamentary Papers p.14, 16, T71/857; Parliamentary Papers p. 5, T71/853.

identities.²⁶ During her time as an Artist-in-Residence at the Victoria and Albert Museum, she created the project *A Series of Unfortunate Inheritances*, which examined objects in the museum's collection which had histories connected to the institution of slavery.²⁷ Working together with Young, Adukwei Bulley created a series of poems which were spoken aloud over footage of her interacting with these objects which had this past. Juxtaposing her own Black female body with portraits of white slaveholders like Bernal, some of her poems give a voice to the enslaved, while others question the remembered of the figured who previously owned these objects. The poem [*Men like you say mankind*] states "on your tombs are merchant, benefactor... All's well that ends well when you know how to lie." The poem highlights how some parts of a legacy, like Bernal's as a collector, can obscure the other parts of it, like that he was a slaveholder. Adukwei Bulley's work is an important example of how institutions can face the uncomfortable histories of those who have been associated with them, and how they can use art to face these issues head-on.

Conclusion

Having uncovered these candlesticks, it was important to put them on display. Unlike in the case of the Benin bronzes, or the statue of Rhodes in Oxford, it did not feel appropriate to ask that they be hidden away or removed.²⁸ Firstly, this is because for a long time, they have been hidden away, languishing in the silver vault inside the Master's Lodge. Secondly, their material worth is low enough that any movement towards compensation, either towards the descendants or as a scholarship for students of colour, would be a more symbolic than anything which would have a wider, structural impact. Finally, because I believe these candlesticks can do more good inside the College, where they can help to illuminate this part of our history which for too long as remained in darkness, than anywhere else. These candlesticks are a part of our history, however distasteful we may find it. They represent the entanglement of these histories, and how it is impossible to separate the legacy of enslavement from our present condition. This is why I put together a display in the Old Library, which laid out what this research uncovered, and presented the candlesticks in their full context. The exhibition will run from October

²⁶ On her work, Adukwei Bulley stated that "while the residency revolves around items within the V&A's collection, my intention is not to tell the story of these items." Adukwei Bulley (2018).

²⁷ *A Series of Unfortunate Inheritances* is available to watch as a playlist at <https://youtu.be/AYy5NL-zZRo> [accessed:16/10/2021].

²⁸ See discussion of *Rhodes Must Fall*, restitution in museums, and how "legacies" like these are continuances in Hicks (2020: 209-29).

to November and will be open to the public. What happens to them next is an open conversation. However, I firmly believe that through their ongoing display, they can shine a light on the legacies of enslavement at Christ's.

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