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The unsung statistical hero of the anti-slavery movement: Zachary Macaulay

Zachary Macaulay was a statistician and anti-slavery campaigner, who used his statistical skills to help abolish slavery within the British Empire in the 19th century. To commemorate the 250th anniversary of his birth, a memorial plaque has been unveiled in St George's Gardens, London on Friday 19th October 2018. This forms part of the celebrations of European Statistics Day, which is on Saturday 20th October.



The greatest Briton no-one has heard of: *"You [Zachary Macaulay] have done more towards this consummation [abolishing slavery] than any other man"* William Wilberforce, founder of anti-slavery movement, 1833.

Story of Macaulay

Zachary Macaulay was born in Inveraray, Scotland in May 1768. He was put to work at age 14 as a clerk in Glasgow to add to the family income but moved to Jamaica and became a plantation bookkeeper – effectively a slave overseer. He moved back to England in 1789 and lived with his sister Jean and her husband: **Thomas Babington**. Babington took Macaulay under his wing and introduced him to **the Clapham Sect – a group of Tories against slavery.**

Among them was **William Wilberforce – founder and leader of the anti-slavery movement**. Through working with the Clapham Sect, Macaulay was invited to visit Sierra Leone – the West African colony established to provide a home to emancipated slaves, in 1790. In 1794, aged 25, he was promoted to the post of governor.

Returning to England on a slave ship in 1799, he brought with him 40 African children, with the hope of finding them a better life in the Clapham Sect community. Macaulay became active in the campaign to abolish the slave trade, organising within the London Abolition Committee. The campaign succeeded in 1807, with an Act of Parliament making the slave trade illegal throughout the British Empire. However, the practice of slavery was to continue despite this victory. Many abolitionists had thought that slavery would fade away once the slave trade was stopped, but that turned out to be too optimistic. **Macaulay continued in his activism, helping seize a slave ship in 1809. On this act, William Wilberforce commented in a letter to Macaulay “you really deserve a statue”(1).**

In June 1825, as support for complete abolition was growing, the monthly Anti-Slavery Reporter was launched with Macaulay as editor. He sought to show the true scale of slavery and to argue against claims that conditions in the West Indies had improved. In doing so, **he provided the evidence with which the abolitionists could take their stand in Parliament.** Publication of the Reporter continued until 1830, but by the end the work had worn Macaulay out and he had got into debt. In 1831, his wife Selina died and with his finances in disarray, **Macaulay was exiled to Paris in 1834 – the year the Slavery Abolition Act came into force.** He returned to England once his debts were liquidated and passed away on 13th May 1838. He was buried in a cemetery, although the exact location of his body is unknown, as the cemetery became a public park (St George’s Gardens) in the late nineteenth century.

- “My sober and deliberate opinion is that you [Zachary Macaulay] have done more towards this consummation [abolishing slavery] than any other man. For myself, I take pleasure in acknowledging that you have been my tutor all the way and that I could have done nothing without you”. **William Wilberforce, 1833 (2)**
- “A brilliant statistician blessed with a prodigious memory ... [and] a rare gift for being able to master and abridge the most intractable sources” **Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (3)**
- “The unseen modest ally of Wilberforce.” **William Gladstone, 1833 (4)**
- “It’s a great opportunity on European Statistics Day to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Macaulay’s birth. He was an inspiring unsung hero of the abolitionist movement, using statistics to make the case for change. The Royal Statistical Society is pleased to support this plaque in his honour, and all are welcome to visit it at the contemplative St George’s Gardens in London.” **Sir David Spiegelhalter, President RSS**

St George's Gardens

Zachary Macaulay is buried here, although the exact location is unknown. The gardens were once the burial ground for two nearby churches – the Nicholas Hawksmoor church, St George's Bloomsbury, and the church of St George the Martyr in Queen's Square, now known as St George's Holborn. The land was bought in 1713 and the burial ground opened in 1714. The Gardens remain consecrated ground.

The plaque to honour Macaulay has been donated by the Royal Statistical Society, The Friends of St George's Gardens, University College London and the Clan Macaulay Association.

Contact

1. For further details, or additional comment, please contact Daniel Lapedus: d.lapedus@rss.org.uk 020 761 43920. If you would like to run a feature or comment piece relating to Macaulay the Royal Statistical Society can also help with this.

Notes

1. Further photos available on request.
2. More details on the Macaulay story readily available.
3. The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) founded in 1834 is one of the world's most distinguished and renowned statistical societies. It is a learned society for statistics, a professional body for statisticians and a charity which promotes statistics, data and evidence for the public good. Today the Society has around 9000 members around the world. www.rss.org.uk

References

1. William Wilberforce to Zachary Macaulay 19th October 1809, Mss Wilberforce, d.6.66. In Hague, W. (2007) William Wilberforce: The life of the great anti-slave trade campaigner: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
2. Buxton, C. (ed.) (2010) Memoirs of Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, Baronet: With Selections from His Correspondence. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3. Oldfield, J. R. (2009) Macaulay, Zachary. In the Dictionary of National Biography. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. Cook, F. (2012) Bitesize Biographies: Zachary Macaulay. Evangelical Press.