

Compensation for the owners

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When Britain abolished slavery in its colonies in 1833, it paid compensation to the slave owners. The Slavery Abolition Act provided for the payment of twenty million pounds to the owners of enslaved people, a sum equal to about forty per cent of the annual expenditure of the British government. The compensation was financed in part by a loan raised in 1835, arranged by Nathan Mayer Rothschild and Moses Montefiore. The British government finished repaying the debt incurred for this loan only in 2015.¹

The records of the compensation, which have been made accessible by researchers at University College London in a database of the legacies of British slavery, show that the recipients included planters in the colonies, merchants, bankers, clergymen, widows and investors in Britain, and some residents of other countries, who held mortgages on plantations or had inherited enslaved people. The database has allowed families, institutions and companies to trace their connections to slavery and has stimulated research in other countries, including Switzerland.

The compensation of the owners alone expresses the legal logic of the time: since the enslaved were property, the abolition of slavery was an expropriation that required compensation. The enslaved, who had been deprived of their freedom and their labour, received nothing. The injustice of this arrangement has become a central argument in the debate on reparations. For a lawyer, it is also a reminder that the law of property can protect injustice as well as justice, and that the legal recognition of property rights depends on the moral judgement of what can be owned.

1 Notes

1. On the compensation of slave owners under the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 (£20 million), the loan of 1835 arranged by N. M. Rothschild and Moses Montefiore, and the redemption of the last related government bonds in 2015, see the literature and the database Legacies of British Slavery (University College London). To be verified. ↩

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