

## Introduction: Family matters: slavery, commerce and culture

'The partnership is entirely within the Family where I believe it will ever remain, so long as that Family exists', opined Thomas Hibbert junior in 1772.<sup>1</sup> Writing at a moment in which the Hibbert family's commercial star was ascending, Thomas junior's emphatic underlining of those three words reflected his absolute confidence in the future of the family firm and the system that underpinned it – slavery. For four generations the Hibbert family story was entwined with the world of transatlantic commerce; slave trading, plantation ownership, colonial commodities, shipping, insurance and credit were the lifeblood of their family economy. Slavery transformed the Hibberts from their unremarkable mercantile beginnings in Manchester to the 'first house in the Jamaica trade'.<sup>2</sup> It gave them access to the kinds of social, political and cultural power that allowed them to position themselves within the metropolitan and colonial elites. Thomas junior's unshakable belief in both the harmonious continuation of the counting house and the exploitative labour practices that supported it, is indicative of the widespread acceptance of the institution of slavery in Britain. The system reaped great rewards for both the Hibbert family and the nation; it created a new transatlantic world of commerce, consumption and cultivation, forging new societies structured by, and reliant on, the coercive violence of race-based slavery.

The Hibbert family's involvement with the slave economy began in the late seventeenth century in Manchester. Starting out in trade as linen merchants they realised the enormous potential for expanding their interests into the emerging colonial market. Having set up their business supplying cloth to Liverpool for use in the slave trade, the family eventually sent their eldest son, Thomas senior, to Jamaica in 1734. As the colonial founder, Thomas senior enjoyed spectacular success; in evidence given to Parliament in 1791 he was remembered as 'the late Mr. Thomas Hibbert, who had for forty or fifty years before

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been the most eminent Guinea factor in Kingston'.<sup>3</sup> Thomas senior was eventually joined by his brothers, nephews and great-nephews. Together they built an empire that encompassed a variety of different aspects of the profitable business of slavery. Capitalising on their commercial dominance, the family sought out civic and political position in the colony, before returning to repeat this pattern in the metropole. Thomas senior's nephew, Thomas junior, eventually opened a branch house of the Jamaica business in London. Tired of the world of commerce, he retired to the country estate he had purchased in 1791, allowing his younger brother George to take command of the family interest. Over the course of his lifetime George became the most powerful Jamaica merchant in Britain. Serving as the Chairman of the Society of West India Merchants, a Member of Parliament and the Agent for Jamaica, he was acknowledged as *the* leading spokesman for those with mercantile interests in Caribbean slavery. His influence extended beyond the commercial sphere as he embedded himself within London's political and cultural elite. Adopting the mantle of philanthropist, connoisseur and collector, George was every inch the fashionable metropolitan gentleman. He was eventually joined in the business by his cousin, younger brothers, sons and nephews, and the future prospects of the family seemed assured.

For families like the Hibberts success in the world of colonial commerce, whilst never guaranteed, could bring with it the kind of wealth that transformed social status and maintained multi-generational dynasties. For over 150 years involvement in the slave economy was considered to be 'a public benefit rather than a public issue'.<sup>4</sup> Supported by the Government as a legitimate form of trade, participation in the business of slavery was no barrier to respectability, indeed for some it was the route to it. Involvement filtered through a broad cross-section of British society, from the aristocracy, to the merchant classes, to the ordinary men and women who bought and consumed slave-produced commodities. The incredulity with which abolition was met was clear from a statement made to Parliament by George in 1790. 'I confess', he stated, 'that the abolition of the Slave Trade was a measure not in my contemplation as not believing it probable'.<sup>5</sup> To the West India planters and merchants slavery was an integral facet of British colonial trade and an essential part of empire building – it was simply too important to be allowed to fail.

In 1807, some seventeen years after George expressed his disbelief to Parliament, his brother Robert junior anxiously contemplated the fate of 'the Senior or Junior Branches of our Family, who have before them Prospects not quite so bright as they had some years ago'.<sup>6</sup> The abolition of the slave trade was the source of Robert junior's disquiet,

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representing in the minds of many with slaving interests the slow disintegration of the economic and social structures upon which their fortune and position was built. Confidence turned to self-doubt as the Hibberts grappled with the shifting political climate. Conscious of the family interest, George had been a vocal proslavery advocate since the advent of an organised abolitionist movement in 1787. As a key member of the London West India lobby he used his connections, influence and political acumen to delay the progress of abolition and help secure a generous remuneration package for those individuals who claimed property in people. His efforts were eventually rewarded when the Hibbert family collectively received over £103,000 of compensation money in the wake of the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833.<sup>7</sup> Today this vast amount is the equivalent (at a conservative estimate) of £8.9 million. In accepting the arguments made by George and his fellow West Indians regarding the legitimacy of property in people, the Government enabled the Hibberts, and many others like them, to maintain their respectable status and augment their already considerable wealth.

Despite Robert junior's nervous predictions for the future prosperity of the family, the Hibberts' West India merchant house continued on into the 1860s. In the wake of abolition, the family also diversified into a number of emerging financial markets both at home and in the wider empire. Success in business was matched by other members of the family who variously entered the army, navy and the landed aristocracy. From tentative beginnings in the late seventeenth century, the longevity of the family business marked it as an unusually successful colonial venture. It also provides the historian with a trans-generational lens through which to explore the complicated history and legacies of slavery. This book is concerned with the ways in which the family figured in the networks of religion, commerce, culture and politics that made the system work across both time and place. More intimately it focuses on the family as a site for the interplay between race, gender, sexuality and class. In examining the inner world of the family, the book demonstrates how the Hibberts' story imbricates the personal and the political, the private and the public, the local and the global. It is both the particular narrative of an extended family and a frame through which to negotiate Britain's multifaceted engagement with the business of slavery.

### *Commerce*

Family capitalism was the backbone of British business during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries<sup>8</sup> and was central to the

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complicated operations of transatlantic trade.<sup>9</sup> For the middle classes, kinship 'constituted one of the inner structures which joined individuals and different forms of capital together in communities of interest'.<sup>10</sup> Men, women and children all played their part in strengthening and enlarging these networks. The organisation of the counting house and plantation management were heavily filtered through relations of family and friendship. 'Capital was not anonymous', Catherine Hall has stated, 'it had "blood" coursing through its veins and this had implications for how it functioned on both sides of the Atlantic.'<sup>11</sup> Ties forged through marriage and mutual purpose nurtured the bonds of duty, trust and loyalty – all essential characteristics for working within the high-risk world of the slave economy. Close-knit commercial networks based on personal relationships were crucial to longevity and success. Formal and informal methods of vouching and recommendation existed to protect the business from the threat of the unknown. In a period in which trust played a fundamental role in building the credit relations necessary for investment in long-distance colonial commerce, family and kin provided a sense of security based on shared endeavour and collective responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Transactions within the slave economy were long-term affairs; cyclical indebtedness was endemic, making reputation and personal connections a central part of mercantile culture. Character was a fiercely guarded commodity, as Thomas junior indicated: 'the Opinion of the World, so far as it might affect the Credit of the House, was an Object of very serious Consideration'.<sup>13</sup> The Hibberts enjoyed a reputation for solidity and probity precisely because their business was managed by a single extended family operating on both sides of the Atlantic.

The reproductive labour of women was vital for the continuation of the family business. This was true of both the middle-class Hibbert women and in very different ways the enslaved women whose bodies were harnessed to plantation productivity as both workers and mothers.<sup>14</sup> The British Atlantic merchant house relied on the children of immediate and extended family members, as well as close friends, to provide the personnel necessary for their commercial operations to function smoothly across both time and space. The system of mercantile apprenticeship commonly utilised these kinds of intimate connections to place young sons in commercially strategic positions. The careful expansion of the family structure represented new opportunities for the family enterprise; the marrying of interests, often constituted through matrimonial alliances, enabled the consolidation and diversification of commercial networks, whilst allowing wealth to circulate within defined boundaries. Though Thomas senior had no

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legitimate male children, his brother Robert senior had ten children. Six of his sons were involved in the Jamaica and London branches of the family business. Three of his daughters made useful marriages to men involved in commerce, land ownership and insurance. As the Hibberts transformed from merchants to country gentlemen, their children occupied positions that gradually grew more distant from the family's commercial roots. In this way they represented a pathway for future social elevation.

Of course, the bonds of family could never guarantee the smooth running and success of a business venture. Personal relationships could sour, death and the vexed issue of inheritance might impact on the balance of power within a partnership, family could not always be trusted. The collapse of the West India partnership Boddington & Co. in 1797 served as a cautionary example of what might happen when family relationships broke down. The lucrative firm was dissolved after Benjamin Boddington eloped with his partner (and cousin) Samuel's wife.<sup>15</sup> When the Hibberts' own mercantile partnership experienced a brief period of financial instability in 1796, Robert junior refused to countenance any discussion of putting his country house up as collateral to support the family business. In later years his elder brother Thomas junior offered his estate, Chalfont, and his younger brother George sold off part of his art collection to shore up the counting house. Family businesses like any other were a risky undertaking, as the roll call of bankruptcies highlighted by Julian Hoppit has made clear.<sup>16</sup> Despite their problems, the family remained a stable foundation for negotiating the choppy waters of transatlantic trade and as such is a key unit of analysis when considering the financial operations of the slave economy.

### *Property*

For planter-merchant families like the Hibberts the counting house represented just one aspect of the business. As land owners with large sugar works, enslaved populations, and cattle pens in Jamaica, as well as town and country houses, ships, wharfs and warehouses in England, the issue of property management and inheritance revolved around the family structure. Property, including human property, was bound up in the practices of family life and death. The transference of ownership, or the legal claim to profits generated through another's ownership, was one of the ways in which family relationships were articulated within the system of slavery. An examination of the wills of various slave owners across the Caribbean reveals the intimate connections between and within families sometimes expressed

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through the allocation of property. Large-scale inheritance of estates could, and often did, follow the tradition of primogeniture, though there usually followed a detailed breakdown of the distribution of other forms of property. The designation of an enslaved individual, or group of people, as a token of remembrance, or perhaps as a way to secure against future financial instability, was common. It is through these kinds of practices that many women came into property in people, whether as direct owners, or as the recipients of annuities settled on them by relatives keen to ensure their future living.<sup>17</sup> The slavery compensation records reflect these kinds of associations, revealing that approximately 43 per cent of claimants were women. Enslaved people could be gifted as a wedding present, or included as part of a marriage settlement; a daughter might receive her enslaved childhood companion when setting up a new household, or a son his man servant. Wills might also set out the terms for the loss of property through the manumission of enslaved people. This could represent an expression of gratitude for a lifetime's service, and in some instances constituted the freeing of a slave owner's illegitimate mixed-heritage family. Whether gestures of affection, remembrance or financial acumen the connections of property reveal glimpses into the ways in which the slave owners interpreted particular relationships. How these bonds were imagined by either the recipient or the enslaved is another matter. For close family members, friends and associates inclusion in the will as beneficiaries, trustees, guardians or executors represented an affirmation of their position in relation to the household.

Sometimes embedded in the legalese of these documents was the muted admission of different kinds of familial ties. Employing the discreet language of 'housekeepers' and 'reputed children', some slave owners also recognised and provided for their illegitimate families. Banished from the official recounting of the family Bible, and absent from the published genealogical records, these 'outside' families emerged in the legal fine print. In Jamaica mixed-heritage individuals were barred from inheriting large sums of money and property following the introduction of a law in 1761 to limit the inheritance of people of African descent.<sup>18</sup> The Jamaica Assembly did allow a series of individual exceptions, usually for the offspring of the wealthy elite. The documented exemptions, in the form of a series of private acts, provide much telling information in regard to the relationships between the individuals involved. Tracing property – both ownership of and legal access to – can help the historian to reconstruct family relationships and the ways in which slavery reconfigured them.

*Family life*

While understanding the family as an economic unit is vital for understanding how the system of slavery functioned, the importance of the family cannot simply be interpreted through an analysis of the Hibberts as property owners or commercial agents. For too long there has existed an ‘unfortunate division ... between family history and economic or business history’.<sup>19</sup> This artificial separation has led to unproductive disciplinary silos that have in some instances masked the interconnectedness of the social, cultural, political and economic spheres. Empire families have been the subject of a number of recent historical works that have provided the impetus for thinking through and with the ‘imperial relations’ that gave meaning to a wide variety of colonial experiences.<sup>20</sup> Family, it has been argued, ‘constituted key sinews of empire. But empire, too, could operate as a key sinew of family. It was not simply that one “needed” relations – that family connections underpinned the operation of empire in political, economic, social and emotional ways – but also that imperial processes remade relations and created new ones.’<sup>21</sup> Family structured empire, but conversely empire altered the structure of the family. Like many men in the colonies, the Hibberts engaged in sexual relations with both free and enslaved women of colour. The degree to which these relationships can be considered consensual within the context of a highly racialised and gendered power system is difficult to judge.<sup>22</sup> Charity Harry was named in Thomas senior’s will as his ‘housekeeper’ and, along with her surviving daughter, Jane, she received a significant bequest following a private act to remove restrictions on their inheritance. As will be explored in Chapter 6 (part 1), Jane’s life story is revealing of the ways in which family structures could be made and subsequently unmade through the system of slavery. Her casting-off by the metropolitan Hibberts in the wake of her father’s death and her absence from the official family record were part of a process of forgetting – her illegitimacy and her race a reminder of colonial transgressions best left in the past.

The Hibberts’ encounter with empire profoundly altered family life in Britain as generations of Hibbert men repeatedly traversed the Atlantic, bound by a sense of family duty to make the business work. On his twenty-first birthday in 1771, following the death of his brother John junior, Robert junior recalled a toast he made with his family before his departure for Jamaica:

We all remember the last time we gathered together when my brother John was in receipt of his package and the hopes for the future that he aspired to ... alas it was not to be ... and I ask you to drink to his memory

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and remember his fellowship and good humour ... I have decided to take the position of my brother in Jamaica and will be accompanying my uncle to Kingston to take the place of my brother John and join brother Thomas.<sup>23</sup>

The decision to leave for Jamaica was not to be taken lightly, for death was a constant in the Caribbean and many Hibbert family members were laid to rest in colonial graves. John junior had only arrived in Jamaica in 1769, a year prior to his death, having been summoned from England to replace his uncle, John senior, who had died aged thirty-seven the same year. The experience of living in a slave society was not necessarily one that was relished by all, and both Robert junior and his brother Thomas junior expressed feelings of acute homesickness. On the departure of his deceased uncle's wife for England, Robert junior wrote: 'My spirits depressed beyond what I never before experienced ... After the company leave, my spirits which had hitherto kept up reasonably well, droop to a degree of absolute despondency – this world seems a desert.'<sup>24</sup> For the two brothers Jamaica was a place to be endured before their eventual triumphant return to England. Unlike his older brother, Robert junior returned frequently to the island, having married a white Creole woman. He was certainly the most transatlantic figure within the Hibbert family, as he commented to his sister Mary: 'The Life I have led has kept me so constantly on the move.'<sup>25</sup> Whilst his nephews pined for home and return, Thomas senior laid down roots in Jamaica, creating a new identity and sense of belonging.<sup>26</sup> Having arrived in 1734, he lived on the island for forty-six years, dying aged eighty at his estate, Agualta Vale. Despite his enormous wealth, the life of an absentee in England held no pull for him (bar the occasional visit for the sake of his business and his health) and he was buried on his land atop a hill and memorialised with a vast funerary urn proclaiming his virtues.<sup>27</sup> Thomas senior was unique among the Hibberts in his commitment to making Jamaica a permanent home; by the 1840s the family had no physical presence on the island, reducing their connection to an entirely mercantile interest.

### *Family history*

Family history – complicated, messy and affective – has sometimes been cast as the poor relation of academic history. Frequently caricatured as an amateurish pastime and once reviled as 'the history of darned socks', it is a subject that has been re-energised in particular by feminist scholarship, but also by an incredible upsurge of interest among the public.<sup>28</sup> In a period in which family was *the* central organising structure the diligence of genealogical labour is



vital for unpicking the tangled web of human relations that threaded through the multiple layers that made up British society. This task is made all the more complex when we consider that shared ancestry, as Naomi Tadmor has reminded us, was not the only way in which family was constituted during the period.<sup>29</sup> The household, which could be made up of unrelated individuals, apprentices, servants or kin, was also described as a family. Based on relations of authority rather than biology, these families conformed to Samuel Johnson's definition of family as 'those who live in the same house'.<sup>30</sup> The meaning of family changed over the course of time and within different cultural settings. Within the context of slavery this poses interesting questions: did – as some slave owners argued – the master–slave relationship uncomplicatedly reprise that of the master–servant? To what degree did the plantation recreate or deconstruct notions of the household family?<sup>31</sup> Could property be admitted into that most quintessential of human relationships – the family? 'Family and kin', Leonore Davidoff suggested, 'are understood as ongoing processes, flexible and variable, filled with contradictions and tensions.'<sup>32</sup> People could move in and out of the family under different circumstances, as the Hibberts' expulsion of Jane Harry indicated – the ties that bound could be broken as well.

The study of the family is the study of human relations, it offers a route into the past that begins with the familiar. For those who practise this discipline in relation to their own family it is often a means to self-knowledge, an attempt to understand who we think we are. The popularity of family history reflects our continued attachment to family as a way of coming to know the past. Andrea Stuart's *Sugar in the blood: A family's story of slavery and empire* demonstrates the enduring appeal of the family not only as a narrative device but also as an anchor to a personal connection. Her book opens with the quotation 'In every conceivable manner, the family is link to our past, bridge to our future.'<sup>33</sup> Transatlantic slavery is an institution with a global reach that came to shape the world we know today, and the scale of this history and the magnitude of its legacies have tended to erase the individual. Descended from both slave owners and the enslaved, Stuart wrote of her family history that this was 'a story of migration, settlement, survival, slavery and the making of the Atlantic world ... My family's story is at once very particular, but also wholly typical and representative. It is a story that belongs not just to me but to many, many others.'<sup>34</sup> This sentiment is echoed in the inclusion of a family history display in the 'Legacies' section of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. Volunteer tour guide Barbara Tasker has used her own family narrative to navigate her way temporally and geographically from Caribbean slavery

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through to present-day Britain. Shifting between Bermuda, New York, Liberia and Liverpool, her talk is rooted in both family and local history. Using the global interconnections that shaped her ancestors' lives is an incredibly effective way of linking people and place for her audience. Family history creates a past that becomes, to a degree, more knowable through these recognisable patterns of human connections.

Given that family history is bound up with a sense of both memory and identity, links to the system of slavery can represent a challenge. Saved for posterity and often circulated solely within private hands, family archives are deeply personal. What is kept, what is lost and what is made accessible may be dependent on a variety of factors: damage, loss, destruction and how a family perceives and values its own history. The controversy over American actor Ben Affleck's attempt to suppress the publicising of his family's role as slave owners is demonstrative of the emotional connection that binds the past and present. Forced to acknowledge his attempt to influence the narrative arc of his family story on the PBS show *Finding your roots*, Affleck responded by stating that 'I didn't want any television show about my family to include a guy who owned slaves. I was embarrassed.'<sup>35</sup> Affleck added that 'We deserve neither credit nor blame for our ancestors and the degree of interest in this story suggests that we are, as a nation, still grappling with the terrible legacy of slavery.' The research for this book and the project from which it emerged – 'Legacies of British slave-ownership' – has been aided immensely by family historians who provided documents and information about their ancestors. Their efforts represent a willingness, at least in some quarters, to come to terms with the shame that Affleck invoked, although one is left wondering what continues to remain hidden by family gatekeepers who are less accepting of their familial links. When interviewed about the Hibbert family for the BBC2 documentary *Britain's forgotten slave-owners*, Nicholas Hibbert Steele commented on the necessity of a public reckoning with the slaving past. He stated that:

The subject is too important, it's important to millions of people on all sorts of different levels whether they were involved in slavery or were a product of slavery ... There were some harrowing stories here, there is absolutely no point in trying to bury them, it is truth and reconciliation time, the story has to be outed.

When asked by presenter David Olusoga if some of what he had been working through as an individual was applicable to British society more broadly, Hibbert Steele responded, 'I think that there is a sort of collective shame here and that needs to be acknowledged. I think that what is known should be known by all.'<sup>36</sup>

*History and national identity*

The most recent attempt to grapple publicly with Britain's role in transatlantic slavery was during the bicentenary commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007.<sup>37</sup> Criticised for a disproportionate focus on William Wilberforce, the official narrative reinforced Britain's self-fashioned reputation as *the* global champion of freedom. The irony of Britain's transformation has been pointed out by Linda Colley, who stated, 'From being the world's greediest and most successful traders of slaves in the eighteenth century the British had shifted to being able to preen themselves on being the world's foremost opponents of slavery.'<sup>38</sup> This, she has argued, 'revealed as much if not more about how the British thought about themselves'. In order for abolition to take centre stage, participation in the business of slavery had to be forgotten. Emerging from the cleansing waters of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act, the newly converted 'anti-slavery nation' adopted the mantle of emancipator with vigorous energy, using this identification to make further incursions into Africa under the auspices of suppressing slavery and spreading civilisation.<sup>39</sup> The end of slavery did not signal an end to Britain's imperial ambitions, indeed it ushered in a new era of colonial expansion based on ideas of cultural and racial superiority and justified by notions of benevolence and improvement. This tangled history of empire and humanitarian interventionism has left a lasting imprint on Britain's understanding of both itself and its place within the world.

That abolition is still imagined as a defining moment in the formation of British national identity has been demonstrated time and again by politicians on both side of the traditional divide. In 2004 Gordon Brown, then chancellor of the exchequer, delivered a speech on Britishness at the Commonwealth Club. In defining the national character he evoked Britain's 'unique' history in order to assert that 'Britain can lay claim to the idea of liberty.'<sup>40</sup> He opined that 'it was in the name of liberty that in the 1800s Britain led the world in abolishing the slave trade'. The omission that slavery continued on for many decades only to be replaced by the inequities of colonial rule is precisely the kind of active forgetting that is required in order to make the history of abolitionism fit with a framing of freedom as central to Britishness. In 2014, Prime Minister David Cameron similarly centred the antislavery past in a newspaper article on 'British values' in the *Daily Mail*. The text included a reminder that 'this is the country that helped ... abolish slavery'.<sup>41</sup> The following year the names of Wilberforce and his abolitionist allies were invoked repeatedly during parliamentary discussions in the lead-up to the passing of the Modern Slavery Act in 2015. Antislavery was cast as part of the national DNA, a heritage to be drawn upon in the

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fight against the continued scourge of the old foe. This undue focus on abolition, without proper regard for what came before and after, has impeded a serious national reckoning with both the legacies of slavery and the failures of freedom that continue to shape the present.

In 2014 the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) set out a ten-point plan for reparatory justice. The publicity surrounding the move reminded the nation, and indeed the world, that any easy affinity with antislavery must always be tempered by the knowledge that for many hundreds of years prior to that Britain, and other European nations, participated enthusiastically in the slavery business. Historical amnesia around Britain's slaving past has served to obscure the ways in which it created and sustained ideas about culture and identity. Prior to the advent of organised abolition, proslavery patriotism rooted in ideas of commercial greatness, maritime power and racial superiority, had much purchase in Britain. 'Rule Britannia', first performed in 1740, trumpeted the nation's special claim to freedom whilst declaring that 'Britons never will be slaves'.<sup>42</sup> Written during a period of great expansion for the British slave trade, the author James Thomson saw no contradiction in Britain championing liberty whilst simultaneously subjecting African people to enslavement. Instead his words delineated the limits of full citizenship and national belonging, for if Britons could never be 'slaves' then conversely enslaved people would never be British. The struggle over abolition was about more than just the right to trade in and possess people – it was a debate over the nature of both British national and imperial identity.<sup>43</sup> As has been seen in the debates over Brexit, discussions about trade and commerce can, and do, act as a cipher for much more deep-rooted conflicts about culture and identity. The figure of both the slave owner and the enslaved were sites of bitter political contestation in which difference played a crucial role in defining Britishness. Ideas about Africa and Africans were informed by troubling hierarchical assumptions about race which were common to both pro and antislavery supporters. In the abolitionist imaginary the slave owner was cast as a cruel despot whose tyranny made him ultimately un-English. Whilst there can be absolutely no denial of the violence and exploitation of slavery, it is unhelpful to think about slave owners and their supporters as monstrous aberrations, particularly in the context of Britain's wider imperial history. There is an ordinariness rather than an exceptionalism to the everyday accommodation with racial violence that underpinned slavery and imperialism. Probing the lives of one of the many 'respectable' families who were implicated in, and acclimatised to, the brutality of the system offers a window into understanding the mentality of perpetration. It is this history of the perpetrator which unsettles the narrative of British history as being woven through with the 'golden thread of liberty ... of the individual

standing firm for freedom and liberty against tyranny'.<sup>44</sup> Whilst the history of antislavery has served, and continues to serve, as a useful proxy for politicians keen to present a particular vision of the nation, this myopic view of the past requires a silencing of the less palatable aspects of Britain's role in transatlantic slavery.

### *The culture of proslavery*

Culture has played a central role in the analysis of the formation of antislavery in Britain.<sup>45</sup> Sentimentality, benevolence, philanthropy, improvement and religion have all been interrogated in relation to the development of concepts of humanitarianism and reform. Proslavery existed in the same cultural moment; it intersected with these discourses, harnessing their language in order to appeal to an emerging public political sphere. Culture is key to understanding ideas about race that were crucial to both pro and antislavery arguments. Whilst they might have differed in their views on slavery, both sides of the debate shared a belief in European cultural superiority. As David Bindman has pointed out, 'The ability to make aesthetic judgements could in itself be a way of dividing the "civilised" from the "savage"'.<sup>46</sup> Taste as a form of imperial power became a means of discerning between the ruler and the ruled. The relationship between slavery and culture at a more practical level stemmed from the relationship between colonial labour, transatlantic wealth generation and metropolitan habits of consumption. The cultural world of the slave owners in the Caribbean has received increasing scholarly attention.<sup>47</sup> There has been less work done on the cultural lives of the absentee planters and merchants in Britain.<sup>48</sup> The histories that have been written of these groups have not been 'particularly interested in the identity and social tensions of a slave-owning family in private and public life'.<sup>49</sup> Paula Dumas's recent work has shed light on some of the ways in which arts and culture were used to convey an anti-abolition message. Her focus, however, is on explicit political productions rather than the ways in which a personal connection to collecting, patronage, charity and religion might have impacted on the organisation and representation of proslavery.<sup>50</sup> Cultural networks constituted through membership of clubs and societies, philanthropic activities, the culture of connoisseurship, even attendance at church, reinforced a sense of shared identity, as well as offering opportunities for lobbying through personal relationships. The Hibberts were part of a social and cultural milieu that provided them with access to power outside of, but nonetheless intimately linked to, the world of formal politics. A serious interest in collecting elevated George into London's cultural elite, introducing him to individuals who could, and did, further his family's interests when pressed to do so. Cultural

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participation and acceptance also allowed the Hibberts to fashion a sense of self that was a direct repudiation of the abolitionists' public representation of the slave owner as debased and un-English.

In fascinating and largely unexplored ways the cultural arena acted as a site for interplay between pro and antislavery campaigners. Culture provided the social lubrication necessary to smooth any political frictions that might otherwise have impeded the enjoyment of polite gentlemanly pursuits. George was a founder of the London Institution. He was joined in this endeavour by a large number of his West India commercial associates. Perhaps more surprisingly the abolitionists Zachary Macaulay and brothers Henry and John Thornton were also involved. George, his brother William and their nephew Samuel, all lived in Clapham Common with their respective families. George was a trustee for Holy Trinity Church – the spiritual centre of abolitionist activities. The family owned prestigious pews in the church, they contributed to its maintenance and a number of them were buried in the graveyard – sharing the same space in death with their political rivals in life. In adopting the social mores of their abolitionist detractors, the Hibberts could present slave ownership as a respectable occupation which sustained useful members of the community and by extension the nation. Exploring the social and cultural dimension of the lives of metropolitan slave owners and merchants complicates our understanding by challenging the two-dimensional caricature offered by the abolitionists. This is not done as a means of redeeming tarnished reputations, but in order to demonstrate that a brutal system does not necessarily require its supporters to conform to any one particular form of identity or pattern of behaviour. Without ever once visiting Jamaica or wielding the whip, George was one of the most powerful proslavery lobbyists, and was all the more effective because of his perceived urbanity and cultivation.

### *Archival power*

Documentary traces of the Hibberts' story can be found in private, commercial, institutional, political, colonial, literary and art historical papers. The geographic span of their public archival presence takes in regional record offices in Gloucester, Derby, Devon, Surrey and Cambridge. Material can be found in the National Library of Wales and The National Archives in England. Internationally records relating to the family are housed in the Jamaica National Archives and the Island Record Office, as well as in a series of repositories in America. Part of the family's private archive is located in Melbourne, Australia, where it has been carefully compiled by family descendant

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Nicholas Hibbert Steele. The distance travelled in the production of this research is indicative of the ways in which histories of both slavery and the family connect the local, national and global. As the geographic spread of the slavery compensation records have confirmed, Britain's links to the slave economy cannot be contained within a port city narrative. If we follow the money, the archives and the families, there are concentrations in expected places (London, Bristol, Liverpool and Glasgow) but also dispersals as patterns of habitation and interest changed over time. Over the course of several generations the Hibberts shifted from the mercantile classes to the landed gentry. Their commercial properties in cities like London disappeared and were gradually replaced by country houses. As these changes occurred their histories, and that of the system of slavery that underpinned them, became interwoven with rural narratives.<sup>51</sup> These transatlantic connections pose a challenge to little-Englander provincialism and exclusionary forms of local history and identity.

There is no single repository for the Hibbert archive – like the family itself it inhabits both public and private spaces. Political and commercial material is far easier to come by as the records have been preserved for posterity. Archival practice has privileged the affairs of political men, assuming that they will occupy the historian and are therefore worthy of conservation and digitisation. Business archives are more patchy; some of the Hibberts' commercial letters can be found in the collections of their wealthy correspondents, but their own mercantile records have not survived. The continued existence of the West India Committee (formerly the Society of West India Planters and Merchants) has ensured that their papers have been collected and archived. The documents are a vital record of the activities of proslavery campaigners, offering a window into the tactics of one of the most powerful lobbying groups of the period. Taken together these document caches record and reflect the important work of men. As Adele Perry has noted, 'the official archive is gendered from the start, associated with male authority and textual records, and disassociated from women, speech, and fiction'.<sup>52</sup> This 'gendered schism of record-keeping' inevitably privileges the Hibbert men over the Hibbert women. Like Perry's history of the Douglas-Connolly family this book will not be able to 'adequately restore' the Hibbert women to the historical record.

Some of the correspondence that survives documents a female-centred network of knowledge exchange. Family matriarch Abigail wrote regularly to all her children, as well as her sons' wives, sharing gossip and advice. Anxious letters between members stand as testament to the ways in which empire penetrated the family's inner life. From fretting about the noxious climate's ill effects on the health



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of cherished sons, to the 'apprehension of a second Domingo affair', the family letters are a fascinating mixture of domestic, imperial, commercial and political concerns.<sup>53</sup> The correspondence, alongside both Robert junior's diaries and George's commonplace book, offers a more intimate perspective on family life. Robert junior, for example, noted down each of his wife's births and miscarriages in his diary. He recorded the heights of his surviving children as they grew. Incidences of first love and loss, family squabbles and even sexually transmitted diseases were detailed. Disturbingly mingled amongst the social commentary were regular entries referring to the sale of various 'Cargoes' – Robert junior's euphemistic description of the enslaved Africans. The interweaving of business, pleasure and the day-to-day musings of a regular diarist reflect the ways in which slavery was unremarkable for those who made their living from it. These connections can be read materially in the physical object of the diary, as Robert junior noted on the opening page: 'The following memoirs were originally written in a temporary manner in an unbound stitched paper book which had contained the Sales of the *Bonaventura* cargo sold so long ago as January 1779.' Recognising that 'The book is of course perishing, and to save the events from perishing also, I think it best to publish them in this bound Book, during exceptional rain.'<sup>54</sup> Similarly, George's commonplace book also contained writings that allow us to enter into his private realm. Including both self-authored works and carefully copied texts, his commonplace book offers a window into his thoughts on a variety of subjects. In it can be found plays he had written for his children to perform, with each role allocated via annotations in the margins. Passages on marriage and gender roles, instructive verses on good behaviour for his daughters, patriotic speeches for his sons and his own poems dedicated to his sick, dying and dead children articulated the emotional depth of the family bonds. Combined together these documents enable us to see empire not only as a function of state policy or the expansion of trade, but also as an embodied and affective lived experience.

Because they were an eminent family active within public life there is a wealth of records detailing the Hibberts, yet it is far harder to find evidence that supports an examination of the lives of the enslaved people whose labour propelled the family into archival visibility. The official archive, an entity that both reflected and circumscribed the lived experiences of colonial subjects, was never designed to animate the subjectivity of the enslaved. Documents relating to enslaved people offer moments in which the individual emerges, but very rarely on their own terms. In the Slave Registers



for Jamaica the first triennial count in 1817 referred to enslaved people by name, but subsequent counts noted only 'increase' or 'decrease' in relation to the population of the estate. Couched in the language of a commercial inventory, this form of accounting for the enslaved can only ever be a fleeting record of a life lived. Claims to individual subjecthood are further compromised when we consider the naming practices of plantation society – it was the owner's prerogative to bestow a given name. This is evident in the records of the Hibbert plantations, where a number of enslaved people were named for various family members. Indeed within the naming practices on the Hibbert plantations it is easier to trace their own family connections. An entry in the 1817 register for the family's plantation Agualta Vale records two enslaved people named George Hibbert and Samuel Markland.<sup>55</sup> The former was named for the senior partner in the Hibberts' London counting house and the latter bore the surname of his nephew, Robert Markland junior, a Jamaica slave trader. Mirroring some of the gaps and silences within the Hibbert family story, Andrea Stuart has lamented the historical imbalance in terms of the presence of the slave owners and the enslaved within the historical record. She has written that 'Ghosts haunt this tale, small men whose lives leave only very faint footprints and slaves whose sufferings leave no mark at all.'<sup>56</sup> This book is written with a recognition that the records privilege the slave owner and in some ways this volume will amplify the racialised power dynamics of historical representation. In reconstructing a history of an elite planter-merchant family this book reconnects metropolitan power with colonial exploitation. It is an attempt to put both slave ownership and the enslaved back into a narrative of British history by exploring the ways in which it impacted on a broad cross-section of society over the course of over a hundred years of family history. The book cannot, and does not, do the work of recovery for the many thousands of enslaved people who were bought and sold by the Hibberts.

Part I of the book details the foundation of the Hibberts' transatlantic business. Beginning in Manchester in the early years of the eighteenth century, Chapter 1 explores the relationship between slavery, cotton and capitalism by documenting the family's initial interest in Atlantic commerce as cotton manufacturers trading to Liverpool. It places the family within a network that was constituted through religious identity and marriage. Complicating the relationship between non-conformity and abolition, Chapter 1 sheds light on the Unitarian network engaged in the slavery business and linked through the Cross Street Chapel in Manchester. Shifting the narrative from Britain to Jamaica, Chapter 2 considers how the

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Hibberts established themselves within the merchant-planter elite during the mid-eighteenth century. It charts the family's adoption of civic and political power, their merchant houses, slave trading activities, commercial correspondents and plantation interests. It reflects on ideas of colonial masculine sociability through an analysis of daily life in their townhouse in Kingston. Chapter 2 also includes details of the experiences of enslaved people on some of the Hibberts' estates, both during the period of slavery and in the immediate post-emancipation era. Traversing the Atlantic once again, Chapter 3 examines the London commercial world and its ties to slavery through an account of the structure and operations of the Hibberts' counting house. It documents the multi-layered interests the Hibberts had within the slave economy, including the significance of their involvement in the funding and management of the West India Docks. It outlines how the personnel reconfigured over the course of three generations of Hibberts, until the winding-up of the firm in the 1860s.

Part II considers the Hibbert family's involvement in the politics of proslavery. Chapter 4 documents the formal and informal political sphere of the London West India interest during the campaign to abolish the slave trade. It considers how both George and his brother Robert junior articulated anti-abolition arguments in evidence given to Parliament. It charts George's rise to prominence and his impact on strategy and rhetoric, in particular following his election as a Member of Parliament in 1806. Chapter 4 explores the divisions within the West India interest, arguing for the existence of a distinctive form of metropolitan proslavery discourse. Chapter 5 considers the period of amelioration leading up to the renewed campaign to end slavery. It was during this crucial period that George became Agent for Jamaica, making him the colony's most powerful spokesman in Britain. His position as a leading proslavery advocate made the family a target for the abolitionists, who looked to undermine George's construction of slavery as a benevolent institution by focusing on the treatment of the Hibberts' own enslaved workers. Chapter 5 gives details of the scandal that erupted over conditions on George's cousin Robert's plantation and the pamphlet war which ensued. It also recounts the part that George played in negotiating the final process of abolition including details of his role in securing compensation.

Part III of the book moves from the public realm to the private. Chapter 6 (part I) focuses on family life in Jamaica through an examination of the different forms of intimate relationships that the Hibbert men experienced. It gives an account of their marriages to

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Creole women and how these relative outsiders were perceived by the metropolitan family. It details sexual relations, diseases, miscarriage and infant death experienced as part of everyday life on the island. Where possible it records the Hibbert men's relationships with enslaved and free women of colour and their children. In particular it examines the story of Thomas senior's daughter Jane Harry in relation to ideas about class, race and gender in the period leading up to the onset of abolition. Chapter 6 (part II) considers family life in England, documenting a close-knit network whose lives were deeply intertwined. In choosing to settle in Clapham, the Hibberts mirrored the Christian respectability of their antislavery neighbours. Through an analysis of George's commonplace book Chapter 6 (part II) explores ideas of domestic masculinity during a time in which concepts of manliness were changing in response to the development of the notion of separate spheres. It analyses George's attitude towards marriage and parenthood, and how these ideas shaped the expectations of gender in relation to both his wife and children.

Chapter 7 explores the cultural lives of absentee planters and merchants through an examination of George's collecting practices, patronage and participation in elite clubs and societies. It considers the role of culture and taste in the formation of racialised ideas of civilisation. In documenting the family's collection Chapter 7 considers the financial and cultural capital accumulated through the investment of slave-based wealth in the arts. Engaging with recent scholarship on slavery and the country house, Chapter 8 discusses the Hibberts' transition into the country house owning gentry. It documents their purchasing, building, renovation and landscaping of country estates, arguing that this left behind a distinctive legacy in terms of the built environment and heritage. In relation to both their country houses and also more broadly their individual cultural and political interests, Chapter 8 discusses the philanthropic activities of different family members. Benevolent bequests and charitable giving formed an important part of gentlemanly culture, and also offered an opportunity to create an identity and memory separate to that of the slave owner. Chapter 8 ends with a discussion of the relationship between slavery and philanthropy, and the complicated legacies that this has left behind.

Collectively this book argues for the centrality of the family in our understanding of the commercial, political and cultural world sustained by transatlantic slavery. It is also suggestive of the different ways in which the family was profoundly altered by its encounter with it. Slavery transformed the Hibberts, propelling them into positions of

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power both at home and in the empire. During the years of turmoil brought about by the abolition campaign it was their involvement with slavery which threatened to dislodge them from their respectable position. In the end the family prevailed and were able to use the compensation money they received to reorient themselves away from the plantation economy. Whilst over time their commercial connections to the Caribbean were severed, their story remains enmeshed with the history and legacies of slavery both in Britain and Jamaica. If empire sought to create a (distinctly unequal) family of nations, it was the family itself that was at the centre of making that empire. This book reconnects metropole and colony, the slave owner with the enslaved – it argues that Britain's history is both local and global in its reach and impact. The narrative speaks to what is remembered and what is forgotten, what is represented and the gaps and silences that both define and deny visibility. It is the story of trade, colonisation, enrichment and the tangled web of relations that gave meaning to the transatlantic world. It is the Hibberts' story and it is Britain's 'island story'.

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