EXPLORING THE LEGACIES OF EMPIRE:

SOME PERSPECTIVES FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Southern Voices Project, a Manchester-based voluntary organisation, was founded in 1990 because the perspectives, knowledge, and presence of people from the Global South were missing from discourse in the UK on a wide variety of current and historical issues.

This meant that knowledge of such issues was partial and skewed, often characterised by misinformation and stereotypes. These existed in all areas of life and excluded the lived experience of people from the Global South. Our main purpose is to redress this by giving voice to perspectives from the Global South.

Southern Voices members at the launch of ‘From the Shadows of War and Empire’ exhibition at the Peoples History Museum in Manchester, 2016

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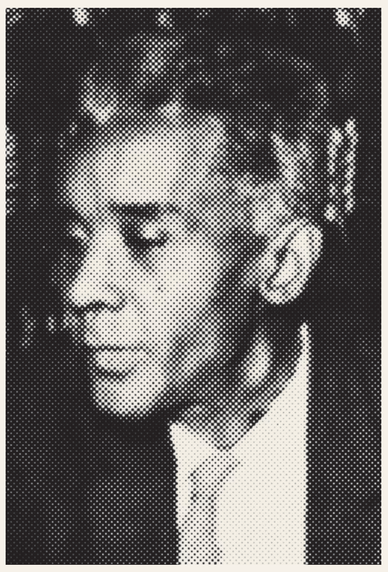
What should we learn about the British Empire and its legacy?

In this exhibition we explore:

- **the significance of the civilisations that existed prior to British colonisation, civilisations that came to be attacked and undermined – if not completely overlooked or ignored.**
- **the legacies of the vast forced migration that happened as a result of enslavement and the slave trade, and of the 'white tide' of British migration that overwhelmed colonised indigenous peoples.**
- **the environmental consequences of the exploitative economic system imposed by British colonialism.**
- **the imposition of national boundaries, the loss of political control and how indigenous and colonised peoples resisted this.**
- **systemic cultural oppression and the lasting legacy of the ideology of white supremacy.**



Our discussion of these themes is centred around the views of the people who were colonised. How did they view this destructive intrusion? What were their experiences and responses? We look to sources from the Global South such as C.L.R James, the Trinidadian author of 'The Black Jacobins', who was one of the first historians to write about resistance to slavery from the point of view of Southern peoples – in this case of Caribbean peoples.

'Until the lions have their historians tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter'

Yoruba proverb

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Civilisations of the Global South

Colonialism promoted the idea that European civilisations were superior to those in the Global South. Pre-colonial civilisations were either not acknowledged or devalued as primitive or exotic. Yet the first humans evolved in eastern Africa, and the first civilisations from around 3,500BCE were in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq), in Egypt, the Indus Valley (modern day Pakistan), in China, Peru and Mexico – all in the Global South. There was, and still is, a great deal to learn from pre-colonial civilisations.

Irrigation systems in ancient Mesopotamia

In South Asia, almost 2,000 years ago, the modern decimal system and the concept of 'zero' originated. These were revolutionary mathematical innovations at the time. Islamic civilisations, such as the Ottoman Empire, encouraged scientific developments which provided a foundation for Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Indigenous communities across the world have long been caretakers of the natural environment – protecting the land, respecting wildlife, and utilising traditional knowledge passed down through generations. The Iroquois people of North America, for example, have a philosophy called the Seventh Generation Principle, meaning their laws should care for the futures of people seven generations from now. What can we learn from this in the face of the current climate crisis?

When the British colonised these civilisations, they plundered much of their culture. For example, in 1897, during a violent attack on the city of Benin, West Africa, the British stole 2,500 religious artefacts and artworks. Many of these are still in the possession of British institutions like the British Museum, despite being obtained illegally.

The Benin artworks had a strong influence on the early formation of modernism in European art.

ABOVE: The Bakhshali Manuscript, found in Pakistan and written on birchbark, is an ancient mathematical manuscript dating back nearly 2,000 years containing quadratic equations and the use of zero.

BELOW: Taqi al-Din (1526-85) astronomer and scientist during the Ottoman Empire.

ABOVE: A Benin Bronze displayed in the British Museum

LEFT: Looted objects from the Benin Punitive Raid, 1897

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Wealth from slavery

ABOVE: Slaves cutting the sugar cane in the Island of Antigua, 1823

The Atlantic Slave Trade involved the forced movement by Britain of 3.1 million African people from West Africa to work on sugar and tobacco plantations in the Caribbean and North America.

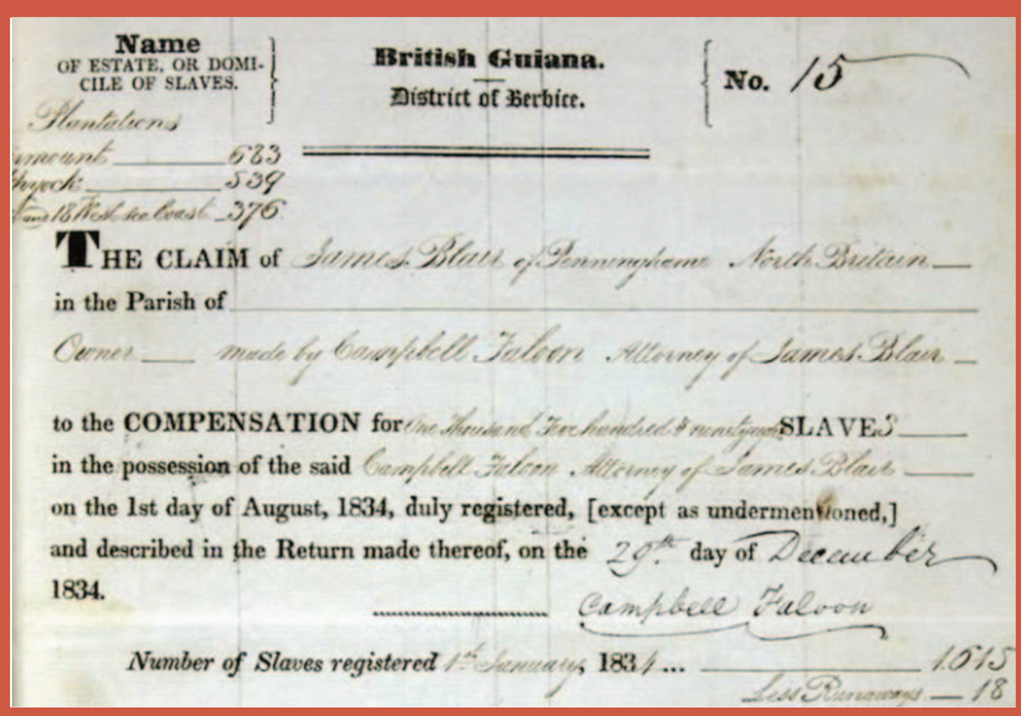
When slavery was abolished, the slave owners were compensated for their financial loss (which the UK Government only finished paying off in 2015!) but the enslaved people received no compensation. White British politicians are often credited with Abolition, but slavery was largely abolished because persistent rebellions by the enslaved were successful in making it economically unviable for the British to continue.

Britain did generate an enormous amount of wealth from slavery. About 5,300 voyages were made from Liverpool to take enslaved people from West Africa to the Caribbean and the American colonies. This enriched Liverpool traders.

During the 19th century, Manchester got most of its cotton from the United States, grown by enslaved people in plantations there. The cotton industry was central to Britain's industrial revolution, which enriched many industrial cities like Manchester.

In March 2014, Caribbean heads of state came together to call for reparations for slavery. This is part of an ongoing debate surrounding the need for reparatory justice to address the legacy of damage caused by slavery. Black Lives Matter protests have thrown a spotlight in recent years onto institutions that benefitted from slavery, with the statues of slave owners in universities, cities and towns being a target.

The great atrocity of slavery continues to affect the descendants of those who were enslaved. Many families have to grapple with generational trauma, inequalities and unanswered questions.



Name OF ESTATE, OR DOMICILE OF SLAVES. Plantations
British Guiana. District of Berbice.
No. 15

THE CLAIM of James Blair of Pennynghame North Britain
in the Parish of
Owner made by Campbell Falcon Attorney of James Blair
to the COMPENSATION for SLAVES
in the possession of the said Campbell Falcon Attorney of James Blair
on the 1st day of August, 1834, duly registered, [except as undermentioned,]
and described in the Return made thereof, on the 29th day of December
1834.
Campbell Falcon
Number of Slaves registered 1st January 1834 ... 1515
Less Runaways — 18

IMAGES, RIGHT (FROM TOP TO BOTTOM): Compensation for slave owners; McConnel & Company mills in Ancoats about 1820; An Anti slavery installation in front of Edward Colson statue in Bristol; Mother and daughter visit a slave fort in Ghana to discover the history of their enslaved ancestors.

'HERE'S THE REDRESS THAT'S LONG BEEN OWED. HERE'S THE FIRST STEP ON THE ROAD.'
Jackie Kay

In 2019, the University of Glasgow pledged £20 million in reparations to the University of the West Indies.

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ABOVE: Some indigenous Australians say the national holiday, Australia Day, is deeply offensive and should be dubbed 'Invasion Day.'

White invasions

Between 1815 and 1914, 22.6 million British left for the colonies of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US, in a 'white tide' of migration. They migrated due to loss of land and to poverty as well as the pull of a better life overseas, in other words they were mainly economic migrants.

The scale and forceful nature of this migration numerically overwhelmed the indigenous peoples of these regions, in addition to which diseases brought by the colonists devastated indigenous populations. Land was taken, they had few political rights and efforts were made to forcefully assimilate them to European culture, including separating children from their families and communities by placing them in the 'care' of white institutions.

This process has left a huge legacy in the form of the loss of land, ways of life, culture, and identity of indigenous peoples. The struggle for political rights continues today.

In February 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered a formal apology for the mistreatment of Indigenous Australians. But is a formal apology enough?

Cree women and children near Maskwacis (formerly known as Hobbema) Canada, 1890s. They tried to adopt an agricultural lifestyle on land that they did not own or control – land that often was not suited for agriculture. Poverty was common throughout the reserves.

Residential School, Middlechurch, Manitoba. In Canada, the effort to assimilate First Nation peoples to 'whiteness' through the residential school system amounted, according to the truth and reconciliation commission, to 'cultural genocide.'

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Environmental destruction

When the British colonised India, they replaced the native oak and deodar forests in the western Himalaya regions, which were resistant to wildfires, with pine plantations. Every summer, dry pine needles cause massive wildfires in the region.

According to the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) colonialism is an historic and ongoing driver of the climate crisis.

Doctor Hadeel Assali of the University of Columbia says: 'We cannot have environmental justice without reversing the harms of colonialism. But we still do not address the colonial roots of climate change.'

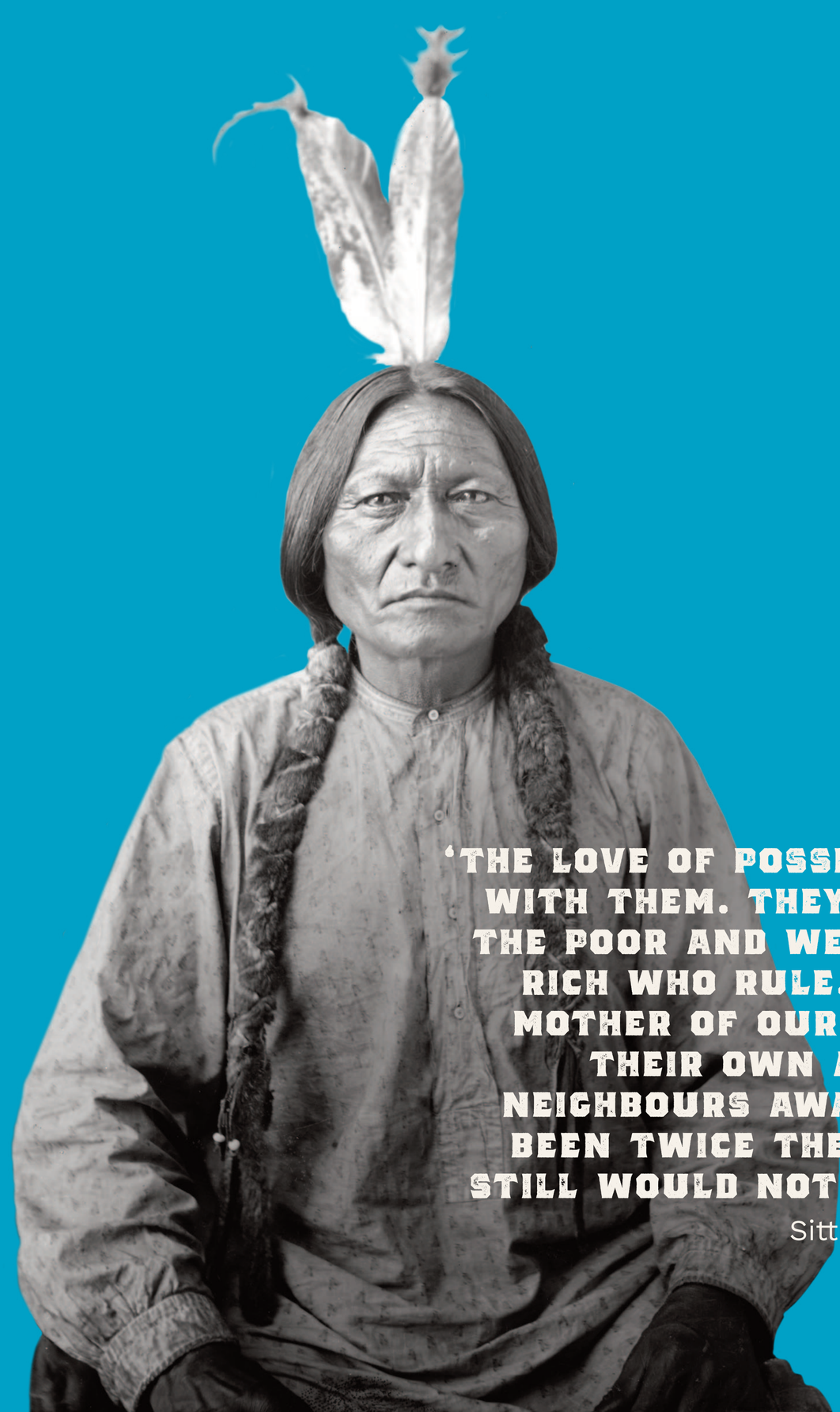
The British imposed unsustainable Western practices on its colonies, extracting the natural resources and exploiting the land at great cost to the environment and its inhabitants.

Leaders of anti-colonial resistance movements such as Mahatma Gandhi and Chief Sitting Bull of the Lakota tribe warned against Britain's relentless extraction. Gandhi said that if India adopted the industrialism of the West, it would 'strip the world bare like locusts.'

Today, indigenous communities all over the world are leading in the fight against climate change. Many de-colonial climate campaigns are demanding Britain urgently pay reparations to its former colonies to finance infrastructure to withstand natural disasters and enable a just transition to greener economies.

Unsustainable agricultural practices and the importation of non-native species have undermined the resilience of the land in many former colonies to natural disasters like fires and flooding.

In Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, rubber and sugar were cultivated as cash crops, and the British deforested vast swathes of land to make way for plantations.



'THE LOVE OF POSSESSIONS IS A DISEASE WITH THEM. THEY TAKE TITHES FROM THE POOR AND WEAK TO SUPPORT THE RICH WHO RULE. THEY CLAIM THIS MOTHER OF OURS, THE EARTH, FOR THEIR OWN AND FENCE THE NEIGHBOURS AWAY. IF AMERICA HAD BEEN TWICE THE SIZE IT IS, THERE STILL WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH.'

Sitting Bull

Protests in 2016 and 2017 against the Dakota Access Pipeline, a crude oil pipeline running through Native American lands, faced police brutality.

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Colonial boundaries

ABOVE: Palestinian children in a makeshift refugee school

Artificial borders and divisions created during colonial times are the source of ongoing conflict.

Africa in 1913 after the 'Scramble for Africa' by European powers

Britain imposed arbitrary boundaries to create dependent colonies. At the Berlin Conference of 1884/85 European nations began the process of carving up Africa for their own economic benefit, paying no attention to local cultures or ethnic groups, and leaving people from the same communities on separate sides of European-imposed borders. Consequently, the Chewa people, for instance, now reside in three different countries: Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia.

Nigeria, made up of over 350 different ethnic peoples, had been forcibly made into a country by Britain. Between 1967 and 1970, the Igbo ethnic people tried to break away to form their own country, the Biafran Republic. This tragedy saw the loss of more than a million lives in the Nigerian Civil War.

Britain in Palestine

Britain took over the League of Nations mandate to rule Palestine in 1920. Under the Balfour Declaration "His Majesty's government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people...so long as it did not impinge on the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities there'. Yet in the aftermath of WW2, with the British ending their mandate, the majority of Palestinians were exiled from their country as part of the precarious emergence of the state of Israel. They are still in exile.

Britain in India

'I BEGAN TO REALISE THAT PARTITION WAS NOT, EVEN IN MY FAMILY, A CLOSED CHAPTER OF HISTORY—THAT ITS SIMPLE, BRUTAL POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY INFUSED AND DIVIDED US STILL.'

Urvashi Butalia in
The Other Side of Silence

Britain's 'divide and rule' policy left its mark on Indian politics and contributed to tension between Hindus and Muslims leading to Partition in 1947.

The Muslim League demanded an independent Pakistan, and Britain tasked Cyril Radcliffe, who had never lived in India before, with drawing the borders between India and Pakistan. The border lines cut through the middle of Bengal and the Punjab, both of which have their own distinct languages and cultures.

Pakistan was created in two parts, East and West, separated by over a thousand miles. Even Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League, was not happy with the partition, as it did not achieve his goal of protecting all Muslims.

The speed of the transition and the failure of the British to provide sufficient security resulted in a huge tragedy. About 15 million people were displaced by Partition, and up to 2 million died in communal violence as they were forced to move to their allocated lands on both sides of the new borders. Sikhs from the divided Punjab and Hindus fled from Pakistan; Muslims fled from India.

Pakistan was divided again through the Bengali Liberation War in 1971 when East Pakistan broke away to become Bangladesh.

India in 1914 (top) and South Asia today (bottom)

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Struggles for freedom and independence

There is a long, often untold, history of anti-colonial resistance.

Still seeking justice today...

Although politically independent, many countries in the Global South are still fighting for freedom from powerful Western companies and former colonial powers controlling trade and debt. This is a continuation of colonial power inequalities, damaging economies and cultures as well as contributing to climate change.

The Maroons were groups of fugitive slaves who escaped British owned plantations in the Caribbean and set up their own communities of resistance. Queen Nanny led the Maroons in the First Maroon War (1731-1739) against the British in Jamaica.

Many later revolts in the British Caribbean were inspired by the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804. Led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, the enslaved people of Saint-Dominque (now Haiti) successfully overthrew French colonial rule and became a sovereign state ruled by former slaves.

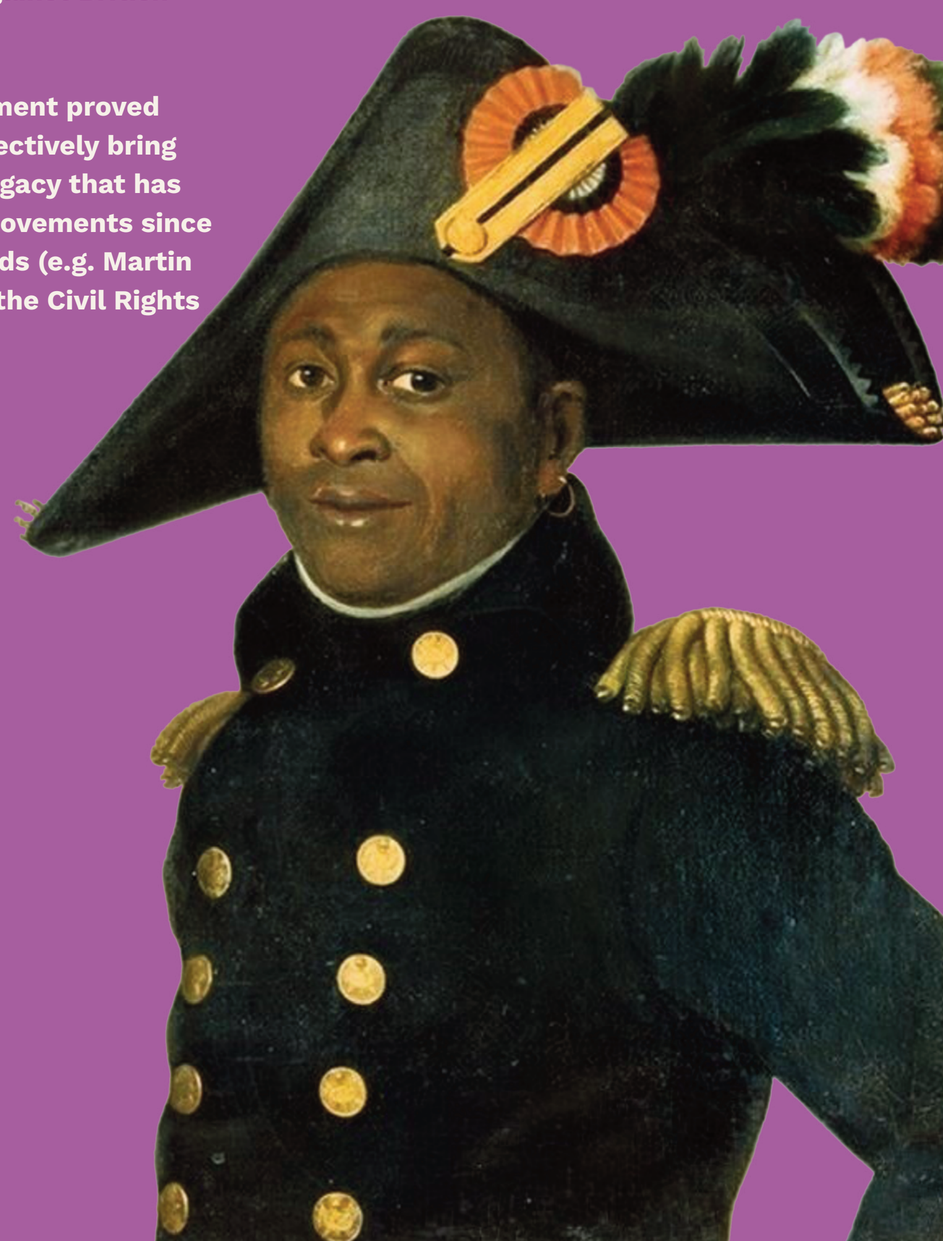
Marcus Garvey was a Jamaican political leader who promoted Pan-Africanism. This was the idea that all those of African descent shared a bond of unity and should join together against the oppressive forces of racism and colonialism. The Pan-African Congress held in Manchester in 1945 preceded the winning of independence by most colonies in the following decades (egs. Sudan in 1956; Ghana 1957; Zambia 1964).

Non-violence was central to India's successful independence movement against British colonial rule.

India's independence movement proved that non-violence could effectively bring about change, a powerful legacy that has caused many other social movements since to adopt non-violent methods (e.g. Martin Luther King's leadership of the Civil Rights movement in the US).

ABOVE: 'Nanny of the Maroons' is celebrated in Jamaican poems, portraits, and currency. The Jamaican 500 dollar bill features this rendering of Nanny.

BELOW: Pan African Congress, Manchester (1945)



RIGHT: François-Dominique Toussaint L'ouverture.

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Racism and the ideology of white supremacy

The belief that white people were racially superior to black people was used by the British to justify their domination of the people they colonised. David Livingstone and Cecil Rhodes promoted the vision that Europeans, because of their supposed inherent superiority, would rescue the African 'heathen' (the so-called 'white man's burden') and impart their superior civilisation onto an Africa that was otherwise incapable of uplifting itself. This ideology, often under the guise of benevolent and patronising altruism, has generated a legacy of racism in Britain.

The journalist, Nesrine Malik summarises this, saying: 'Britain's race relations are a product of colonised peoples moving to the seat of an Empire that made them slaves, subjects and soldiers. The status of the descendants of these exploited and invaded people remains blighted by racism, institutional prejudice and questioning their right to Britishness.'
(*The Guardian***, 2023)**

Or as A. Sivanandan, one time Director of the Institute of Race Relations, put it: 'We are here because you were there.'

The Windrush scandal of 2018 was the discovery that in recent years many Black British citizens, invited to the UK from the Caribbean in the post war period to help rebuild Britain, had been detained, denied legal rights, threatened with deportation and in at least 83 cases, wrongly deported by the Home Office.

A 2023 report found the Metropolitan Police to be institutionally racist (a term first coined by the Macpherson Report 1999 investigating the murder of Stephen Lawrence). Black Brits have been saying this for a long time, among them Doreen Lawrence, whose son Stephen Lawrence was murdered in a racist attack in Southeast London in 1993. The subsequent investigation revealed huge failings, which continue, in the way the Metropolitan Police deals with issues of race.

How can we combat racism in the UK?

One way we can combat racism is through education so ignorance is challenged by making 'visible what is invisible'. To coin a phrase 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.' Or, to quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu, 'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.'

One of the legacies of empire is racism; we need to listen to and learn from those who were colonised and become active allies. In this way some of the myths surrounding empire may lose their agency and justice may emerge.

This exhibition and project aims to contribute to this.