

Woven Histories of Welsh Wool and Slavery

In new collaboration and book, Charlotte Hammond of Cardiff University calls attention to the colonial history of the Welsh woollen industry.

Webs, Welsh plains, Welsh cottons, or “Negro Cloth”, the name most often used by plantation owners and colonial merchants, was a durable ‘plain’ woollen cloth, woven in mid-Wales between 1650-1850. Wool, alongside (and eventually overtaken by) cotton, became *the* global textile industry of the eighteenth century. British merchants used the cloth to purchase and trade in African captives, kidnapped to work on plantations in the Americas in the transatlantic slave trade. Plantation owners in the Caribbean and US South used the handwoven woollen textile to clothe enslaved labourers.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Welsh plains became a popular textile for the jackets, waistcoats, smocks, petticoats and breeches worn by enslaved men, women and children in the Americas. In 1823, the South Carolina planter, Robert Maxwell, wrote that local manufacturers had tried to imitate Welsh Plains but found its qualities to be inferior. Maxwell preferred to buy cloth that had been ‘made by the farmers of Wales’, that arrived in bales of folded pieces 90-100 yards each and that he deemed ‘superior to anything made in England for Negro clothing’.

If Welsh-made woollens were such a popular trade item in the Atlantic slave trade, why has the history of this fabric’s global significance been overlooked? Our project, *Woven Histories of Welsh Wool and Slavery*, and forthcoming book of the same name, supported by [HEFCW Research Wales Innovation Funding](#), aims to improve public knowledge of the ways local histories of woollen production in Wales are entangled and implicated in broader global histories of Atlantic slavery and empire. The project is a collaboration between Cardiff University, Community Researchers Liz Millman of [Learning Links International](#) and Marcia Dunkley of [Black Heritage Walks Network](#), and Coleg Menai in Bangor.

The *Woven Histories* book is structured around the artwork of participating student artists from Coleg Menai. The students have explored traces of this historical narrative that links the exploitation of weavers in rural Wales with the racial injustices of Atlantic slavery and its reliance on the circulation of Welsh-made textiles. Through their research, these emerging artists and designers have developed visual responses to this history. They visualise and assemble fragments: from the ruins of pandy fulling mills in Dolgellau, Merioneth, via the packhorse trails that transported Welsh Plains cloth to England, where it was dyed and finished in Shrewsbury then sent to London and Liverpool to be traded and exported to the Americas, to the connections to the Caribbean and southern states of the US, where Welsh Plains were used to clothe enslaved fieldworkers who toiled on the plantations.

Student work has also been exhibited at [Cardiff University](#). In a one-day workshop for the [ESRC Festival of Social Science](#) in November 2022, and in partnership with Elin Angharad of [Llyfrgell Zine Cymru](#), a group of Art and Design Foundation students each created their own small zine to explore this history. The zines produced reclaim diverse printed material to reframe the dominant narrative of mill or plantation scenes authored by European travellers. Using the theme of zine-making as *marronage* – the act of escaping the plantation – the students used creative research methods - drawing, cutting, collaging images and text and assembling new narratives - as a form of alternative knowledge production vis-à-vis this silenced history.

In Wales, the process of addressing the structural absences of Black history from public history is still ongoing. Professor Charlotte Williams reminds us in *the welsh agenda's* [Education Special](#) (Autumn/Winter 2020) that Wales's unique identity has been shaped by a violent history of conquest and domination. England has been the oppressor and Wales, the underdog, whose language and identity has been oppressed. How then do we confront Wales's undeniable complicity with British imperial exploitation? As Chris Evans demonstrates in [Slave Wales](#), Wales, and Welsh products including wool, copper, and coal, played an integral role in Britain's imperial past.

Recent research, including Evans (2010), the '[Sheep to Sugar](#)' project (2019) and *Woven Histories*, is only scratching the surface of knowledge about this woollen textile. For Historian and Educator, Marcia Dunkley, this is just 1% of the picture. We need, as Dunkley argues during our interview featured in the book, to connect the story to the Caribbean and continue to explore the memory of Welsh Plains from an Atlantic perspective if we are to address what she calls an 'incomplete history'. This is slow work that needs to be enacted across multiple platforms, via the new Curriculum for Wales, and within cultural and heritage institutions. The decolonial work of interrogating this past and its enduring legacies is an ongoing process that requires long-term commitment across multiple sectors.

Woven Histories of Welsh Wool and Slavery is forthcoming with [Common Threads Press](#) in 2023. This collection of artwork, interviews and essays will provide an introduction to this history that implicates each and every person living in Wales and Britain today.

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Images: Zines produced by Coleg Menai students.

Photo credit: Elin Angharad