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Trinity's Colonial Legacies: Transparency, Instrumentality and Agency in an Engaged Research Project

Mobeen Hussain, Ciaran O'Neill and Patrick Walsh

Introduction

This chapter will draw on the experiences of a research team at the heart of a four-year Colonial Legacies Project (TCL) at Trinity College Dublin, focused on unpacking the institution's historical ties to colonialism since its foundation by royal charter in 1592.¹ Conducted by three historians, the project extends beyond a narrow exploration of slavery, aiming to illuminate complex heritage issues in an Irish university and on a global scale. In this way it stands apart from projects that have concentrated solely on a university's relationship to slavery, including at Yale, Harvard and Georgetown in the United States.² Closer to Ireland, there have been significant projects on colonial legacies at Universities in Glasgow, Cambridge, Bristol and Oxford.³ Globally, projects at universities at Dalhousie, Cape Town and elsewhere have all informed Trinity's approach, especially in matters of engagement and transparency.⁴ Trinity's positionality as both an instrument of British colonialism in Ireland and of the significant Irish contribution to imperialism abroad offers historians a distinctive and complex case study of contested heritage. The project's other explicit aim was to be a public history project: to work with others to raise awareness of the college's physical and intellectual colonial legacies, monuments and endowments in the present, and to some extent, foster and enable a more critical appreciation of their significance in our contemporary moment.

The TCL project came about in 2020–2021 in the context of the widespread reconfiguring of monuments and symbolic/heritage landscapes in the wake of Black Lives Matter, the murder of George Floyd and the near-global reaction to these events. Locally in Ireland, BLM inspired student protests outside the Berkeley Library, a landmark building at the heart of the city centre

university campus at Trinity College Dublin. The student protest centred on the memorialisation of an enslaver, and the discomfort that students from diverse backgrounds felt at studying in a building that celebrated his memory uncritically. This action brought Trinity students into dialogue with protests at similar institutions and universities globally.⁵ Named after the eighteenth-century philosopher George Berkeley in 1978, the library's name had become a subject of debate following the wider recognition of the fact that Berkeley had owned enslaved people in eighteenth-century Rhode Island on the east coast of Colonial America. (Fig. 3.1)

The student protests led to a more widespread interest among the public and the college community in the University's complex colonial past. The University administration then acted in the way that administrations usually do in the glare of media interest, which is to say that it panicked a little. That panic led to several internal suggestions about what could be done in response to the student protests. The answer was a Colonial Legacies Research Project, to be



Fig. 3.1 The New Library, 1967, later renamed Berkeley Library in 1978, denamed in 2023, and renamed the Eavan Boland Library in 2025. (Photograph courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin)

led by the Department of History. There are two ways of reading this response. If one were being positive about this turn of events, one could say that this was a reasonable plan to contextualise and consider any possible denaming of buildings rather than acting rashly and without any sort of consensus emerging from the University community. If one were inclined to be cynical, one could equally argue that the funding of such a project would allow several years of breathing space for the institution, while it took soundings on how it should approach these issues from those same stakeholders. The outcome was that the TCL project was funded for an initial two years via the Provost's Office, and in addition to funding for a full-time postdoc, the team was also to be supported by an Advisory Board chaired by the Chancellor of the University, and former President of Ireland, Professor Mary McAleese. The first six months of the project resulted in a draft audit document that identified the major colonial legacies in the college. This was a long document, which you might expect for a 430-year-old university, but it placed emphasis on a few key aspects that we thought the college should focus on:

1. The fact that Trinity's wealth and privilege derives primarily from its status as a major landlord. For three centuries until the beginning of the twentieth century Trinity owned about 1.5% of the land-mass of Ireland, and thus its wealth is derived directly from the colonisation of Irish land and people.
2. The Berkeley library issue should be dealt with in a transparent and open manner, and preferably via consultation and dialogue with the wider public.
3. Trinity's various collections were perhaps most interesting way to reveal the complex positionality of the University: and in particular its human remains collections. There were more than 500 human remains on site, most of which were collected without the consent of either the individuals in question, or the communities from which they originated.

The project's second phase took on a community-centric approach, addressing specific issues of public concern. The first issue centred on the requested reburial of human remains unethically acquired by the University from the offshore Irish island of Inishbofin in 1890. The second public issue centred on whether the University would seek to dename or rename the Berkeley Library in the face of student protests about Berkeley's associations with Transatlantic slavery. The TCL project began to encounter resistance and scrutiny from various University stakeholders as these issues came to greater public attention. This prompted a significant pivot in approach by the University itself, which

established a formal process answerable to the University's Provost – called the Trinity Legacies Review Working Group – to oversee legacy issues in a sustainable manner for the University. This transition fostered more inclusive decision-making processes across the college and ultimately cleared the way for the University board to make decisions in a transparent manner. Crucially, the establishment of the Group has meant that there is now a sustainable mechanism for dealing with legacy issues beyond the lifespan of the TCL project. In 2022 the University committed to public consultation that would inform decisions on the denaming of the Berkeley Library and the return of human remains to the Inishbofin community, and did so on the basis of working papers produced by the TCL team. The consequent decisions by the University board to both dename the library and return the remains garnered global media coverage from April–July 2023.⁶

Instrumentality: Doing History 'for' a Colonial Institution in Ireland

Doing historical work in public is an opportunity, but also a risk.⁷ The rise of different types of reflexive or critical institutional histories over the past two decades has been obvious, but on a case-by-case basis it is sometimes motivated by external critique of a given institution in the media. Such a starting point naturally gives credence to critical commentary on any such initiative, and the extent to which it might be considered an exercise driven by optics, 'woke-washing' or what is sometimes referred to as 'audit culture'.⁸ In the university sector such initiatives have attracted criticism from both ends of the political spectrum, with commentators on the right dismissing them as yet more evidence of the extent to which 'woke' culture has overtaken the modern university.⁹ From the left the critique is often that these initiatives are shallow, overly concerned with establishing (or not establishing) culpability, and that they rarely result in a holistic examination of embedded colonial logic of universities in the Global North. In other words, many think that such institutional histories are self-serving and ultimately aim to preserve the elite status and privilege of ancient universities via a process of insincere apology and brand-management.¹⁰ This type of institutional self-criticism is sometimes folded in with diversity and decolonising initiatives. Sara Ahmed has critiqued this as a form of 'institutional polishing'. When the 'labor [of diversity] is successful, the image is shiny'.¹¹ Such work, it can be argued, can amount to little more than image management by the modern neoliberal university.

When it comes to colonial legacies, institutional histories also tend to have a distinct regional flavour. In North America there is a near-total concentration

on the issue of historic slavery as opposed to related histories of racial science, segregation, or more contemporary issues of ethical funding and/or admission rates of minority students in those same universities.¹² In the UK, university links to the slave trade have also (unsurprisingly) dominated institutional histories over the past decade or so. This in turn has led to an inescapable reckoning on the issue of profits and benefactions at elite British Universities, scientific associations and even public schools and hospitals, many of which were derived from colonial profit.¹³

The specificity of doing colonial legacy work in Ireland, then, is worth dwelling on, since Ireland is not often thought of as a leading European settler colonial power in the same way that England, France, Spain or Portugal are. Ireland and Irish people played a major role in European settler colonialism between the sixteenth and twentieth century, but it remains relatively uncommon for Irish people to think of the Irish diaspora worldwide as the outcome of settler colonial dynamics. In the period of greatest settlement – the long nineteenth century – Britain and Ireland supplied approximately 22 million settlers out of a European total of 55–60 million settlers. Of those settlers, 7.5 million or so were Irish, the majority of whom were in that period at least, Catholic and poor. The land these Irish settlers helped to settle once belonged to Indigenous peoples, and this status as second-class but ultimately very successful white settlers is at variance with the self-image of Irish people as ‘exiles’ from their native land.

This apparent paradox is facilitated by the self-identification of Irish people as victims of colonial oppression themselves, having been colonised in successive waves by Vikings, Normans and the English over the past millennia or so. Robbie McVeigh has argued not only that this postcolonial blindness has affected Irish people’s conception of colonial complicities, but also that it works against acceptance that racism can exist in modern Ireland. This has been ‘theorised out of existence by the disingenuous use of the racism = prejudice + power equation to argue that Irish people, like Black people, have no power to be racist’.¹⁴ Such an historically rationalised self-image is becoming much more difficult to sustain in the wake of recent anti-immigration riots in Dublin, but it is still prevalent in Ireland. Sandrine Uwase Ndaïro argues that ‘Ireland is in a unique position to think about its relationship to race and coloniality more productively and in historical terms.’¹⁵

Trinity College Dublin is – in this respect – the most appropriate of all Irish institutions at which to conduct a colonial legacies project. Trinity’s wealth is in great part derived from the historic colonisation of Ireland. By the late nineteenth century, it was one of the richest universities in Britain or Ireland. A considerable portion of that wealth came from rental income derived from

confiscated Irish land granted to the University by Queen Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I, making it one of the largest landowners in Ireland with control of 1.5 per cent of all Irish land for much of its history. This inherited colonial wealth and privilege means that Trinity is considered less 'Irish' than other universities on the island, and indeed that reputation is to a great extent accurate. No other Irish university regularly flew the Union Jack, or celebrated Armistice and Empire Day well into the mid-twentieth century, or refused to allow the national anthem to be sung on its grounds.¹⁶ No other Irish university nurtured a unionist, loyalist and partisan identity in the partitioned south. Doing work on colonial legacies in Trinity requires us to think through many layers of popular and political biases.

However much we work to be reflexive and conscious of our own positionality as historians working on the history of an institution that employs us, we will inevitably be affected by it. Let us attempt to be clear, then, about how we see our agency in our research work, and the extent to which we are willing to consent to its instrumentalisation. By this we mean both our own intentional use of the research produced by the team to provoke change in the institution we are employed by, and the ways in which our research has been co-opted, managed, supported and distorted by that institution: often for very good reasons. We argue for the usefulness of a reflexive, open and transparent approach to historical research in this scenario. This is why we elected to release our research as it was happening, in the form of an Audit Document, published just six months into the project, and then a succession of working papers, blogs and presentations to the college community and to the world outside. All of these activities were performed in public, but were not intentionally performative. We are also aware that just because we produced research, this would not in itself lead to institutional change.

We understood, even before the project began, that our potential success depended on support from a wide variety of stakeholders. These included, but were not limited to, the student body, the University authorities, the fellows of the University, the interested public (including communities of origin for human remains), and the branches of the Irish state apparatus that our work might come into conflict with. As public history practitioners and teachers, we are conscious of how historians can produce a 'usable past' and that the articulation of a historical narrative to a wider public is never really a value-free or objective process. Rather than masking or eliding our intentions, we have declared them at every available opportunity.

Returning to the imperative for transparency, it is particularly important when taking into consideration how an institution like Trinity College Dublin has been perceived historically and contemporarily – as an impenetrable elite

fortress, a symbol of cultural Anglo-imperial culture, a Unionist stronghold or a distinctly Protestant institution.¹⁷ Many projects that conduct internal investigations have come under scrutiny for remaining opaque and conducting processes behind closed doors which may lead to making decisions that are concerned with maintaining institutional reputations and confirming internal biases and loyalties. Thus, from the earliest stage of the Colonial Legacies project, there was a consensus within our team that the project's methodologies, processes and findings should be made available and accessible.¹⁸ This meant that we publicly shared our Audit and Summary Document in February 2022 after our first meeting with the project's Advisory Board.

We were aware that sharing this document early on would lead to scrutiny, criticisms and even attacks. In the case of Berkeley, in particular, this included individuals critiquing investigations into memorialisation and slavery. The research-finding, expertise and collation process itself – in other words, our work as historians – also came under scrutiny. This can be both welcome and productive, but also exposed us to unfair accusations of 'wokeness' and cancel culture. However, our commitment to transparency necessitated this approach. It allowed us to attend to questions around whose voices are heard and to solicit a wide range of opinions to avoid further harm, marginalisation or erasure.

Responses from constituents internal and external to Trinity that claim questioning legacies and commemoration effectively 'erase' history function to eschew and preclude meaningful research on what and who is remembered, as well as the colonality that is at the heart of much knowledge production in the academy. These issues had previously come to the fore in Oxford's 'Rhodes Must Fall' campaign (c.2015). Taking inspiration from its South African namesake, the campaign's broader aims were to decolonise the University through focusing on iconography, curriculum and representation.¹⁹ However, the element of the campaign that received the most attention was the call for the removal of colonialist Cecil Rhodes from the front of Oriel College.²⁰ As Dalia Gebrial writes of the Rhodes Campaign, it is not a matter of 'disagreeing' with opinions held by Rhodes; rather it is about scrutinising the power that underpins hegemonic knowledge production.²¹ Similarly, in the case of Bishop Berkeley, much of the debate remained about weighing his opinions and activities against his contributions to philosophy, rather than assessing the broader impact of his ideas on enslavement and settler colonialism and thinking about commemoration in the contemporary institution (to which we now turn).

Investigating Awkward Histories: Two Case Studies

Many colonial legacy initiatives have either centred on, or have been sparked by, the legacy of a single individual donor, benefactor or alumni. This is true also of the colonial legacies project at Trinity. The figure of George Berkeley (1685–1753), Anglican bishop, philosopher of immaterialism and colonial slaveowner, has loomed over our project from the very beginning. George Berkeley was one of the great enlightenment philosophers and has been celebrated as one of TCD's most distinguished graduates since the mid-eighteenth century.²² Berkeley had a distinguished academic career at TCD, during which time he held a series of college offices as well as publishing his most important philosophical works. In 1724, and by now dean of Derry within the established Anglican Church of Ireland, he found himself frustrated with what he saw as the increased decadence and corruption of contemporary European society. Seeking an opportunity for a new start, he turned his attention to North America and to Bermuda in particular, where he planned to establish a college that would provide an education for the sons of colonists alongside native American students.²³ In his published prospectus for his project, he expressed the hope that these graduates would then preach the gospel in the American colonies.²⁴ Realising that it might be difficult to convince Native American students to attend his college, he expressed a willingness to kidnap prospective students, demonstrating a coercive element to his missionary plans:

The young Americans necessary for this purpose may, in the beginning, be procured either by peaceable methods from those savage nations, which border on our colonies, and are in friendship with us, or by taking captive the children of our enemies.²⁵

This proposal for St Paul's Bermuda was supported by his former colleagues in TCD, and all of the founding fellows were to be TCD graduates.²⁶ Having published his prospectus, Berkeley spent the next four years soliciting philanthropic and government support for his Bermuda scheme, before deciding to travel to Rhode Island in preparation for his eventual trip to Bermuda in autumn 1729.

Rhode Island turned out to be his ultimate destination, as the promised government funds for St Pauls were not forthcoming. Once in Rhode Island, Berkeley purchased a 96-acre estate near Newport called Whitehall.²⁷ In order to work his farm and American household, he purchased slaves. The deeds for two of these enslaved persons, 'Edward aged twenty or thereabouts', purchased for £76 and 'Philip aged fourteen or thereabouts', purchased for £80,

survive in the Berkeley papers in the British Library, while we know from other sources that Berkeley baptised at least a further two enslaved people, Agnes and Anthony, in the local Anglican church.²⁸ These acts of baptism were significant as they connect Berkeley's practice as a slaveowner to his ideological writings on slavery, in which he argued that Christian baptism could be used as a means of control to make the enslaved more obedient to their master's commands. In making this argument Berkeley was contributing on the winning side to an important debate about slavery, which had profound consequences on how contemporaries viewed the morality of slavery.²⁹ Berkeley therefore was not just an enslaver; he was also an ideological advocate for the slavery system.

Much of this information was either known to Berkeley scholars or easily accessible to them, but it was not always seen as important to them. Berkeley's most significant mid-twentieth century biographer, the TCD professor of moral philosophy and later vice provost A. A. Luce, relegated Berkeley's slaveowning to a footnote, while the authority on Berkeley's American career, Edwin Gustad, included Berkeley's purchase of human beings – 'bought and baptised slaves' – as a subordinate clause on a long sentence about Berkeley's myriad activities in Rhode Island.³⁰ Gustad's emphasis, like Luce's, was on demonstrating Berkeley's influence on early American education at Yale, Harvard and King's College (later Columbia) in New York. Berkeley had, upon his departure from America in 1731, donated his extensive library to Harvard and Yale.

Yale also received Berkeley's Whitehall estate, though the fate of those he enslaved is unknown. This was Yale's first significant endowment, and the University continues to own Berkeley's Rhode Island estate. His importance to Yale's early history was recognised in the 1930s, when a residential building was named after him on campus.³¹ Berkeley's memorialisation at Yale in the 1930s is part of his continuing legacy in the landscape of American higher education. Much more significant of course was the naming of the University of California's campus after him in the 1850s. Its founders drew inspiration from a line in Berkeley's *America: Or The Muse's Refuge*, written in 1726, 'Westward the course of empire takes its way', which they inscribed on a rock on their California campus. This line can be read as an early iteration of the idea of 'manifest destiny' – the ideology that lay behind the settler-colonial project in the American west. This expansionist philosophy differs from the Berkeley campus' modern and contemporary self-identification as a beacon of tolerance and liberalism, but it is part of its history.³²

The scholarly consensus on Berkeley's American project up until the mid-twentieth century was broadly celebratory in tone. His Bermuda scheme may have failed but his influence on American higher education was seen as

significant. Combined with his reputation as an important eighteenth-century philosopher, it gave him a certain name recognition in North America and Ireland. This was understood at TCD, where the University was undergoing a period of expansion and for the first time sought to raise philanthropic funding from America. The centrepiece of this fund-raising drive was the building of a new library to rival the eighteenth-century 'old library' begun in 1709, while Berkeley was college librarian. From the beginning of the 1960s, Berkeley's image and name were used in the promotional materials circulated to solicit funds for the new library, which also cited his time in America to attract US donors.³³ The New Library – considered a classic of brutalist architecture in Ireland – was opened in 1967. It was, however, only in 1978, when the adjoining Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences building was opened, that it was named after Berkeley.³⁴ The College Board minutes record the commercial imperatives that helped drive this decision. Initially, a lecture room in the new building was to be named after Berkeley.³⁵ Registrar George William Percy Dawson cited Berkeley's 'relationship with America [having] increased his fame' and his 'continued relevance' as reasons for the suggestion, which would ultimately enhance the 'image of the college'.³⁶

There was no dissent, and the New Library took on the name of an enslaver, becoming the Berkeley Library. Almost forty years later, in 2017, when the library celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, there was only a brief mention of Berkeley's slaveowning past.³⁷ Things quickly changed. Three years later, inspired by the global BLM movement, TCD students began to argue for the removal of Berkeley's name from the library.

The arguments advanced by the students were strengthened by the radical changes in student and staff profile, in terms of racial and class diversity and internationalisation (28 per cent of students are now international).³⁸ The global turn towards reassessing the memorialisation of enslavers and other problematic figures in universities and other public institutions led to an ongoing scholarly reassessment of Berkeley's American project. Scholars moved past the celebratory treatments of his time in Rhode Island to critically analyse his American writings and their ideological support for slavery, and their impact on British policy. Meanwhile his purchase of human beings, though first highlighted by Black scholars as early as 1939, was given new emphasis in accounts of his life.³⁹ The 'problematic' Berkeley once obscured in footnotes was now more visible.

This combination of local student activism and international scholarly reinterpretation of Berkeley and university legacies of slavery and colonialism provided the impetus for our TCL project.⁴⁰ Our international advisory board suggested that our first task was to gather the evidence of Berkeley's enslaving

activities along with evidence of the University's successive efforts to memorialise him on campus, from the positioning of a prominent portrait in the examination hall in the 1780s through to the installation of a stained glass window in his memory in the college chapel, up to and including the naming of the New Library in 1978. Having assembled this evidence, we sought out best-practice examples from peer institutions across the world to consider how the TCD authorities might address Berkeley's legacy, and why doing so mattered. Our position as campaigning but scrupulously scholarly researchers was clear, and presentations of our initial findings to our students as well to colleagues working in related areas in Britain and Ireland were received positively.

We took particular inspiration from the concept of 'denaming' as developed at Harvard, and in April 2022 presented a memorandum drawing on this work arguing for the denaming of the library to the University senior management team.⁴¹ This proved to be a difficult conversation, with legitimate questions being asked about our project's authority to make any proposal to rename the library. This conversation forced the team to reconsider our argument and our strategy. We needed to do much more than simply present historical evidence and assume that the University would do what we perceived to be the 'right thing'. It needed to respond to alternative arguments to convince those who were more cautious or sceptical about any change to the college's monumental landscape. Any change that was going to be made needed to involve more stakeholders and to involve some sort of shared authority in the decision-making process.⁴² Moreover, it became clear to us that the University would need to create a group with a cross-institutional mandate to recommend decisions to the Board. Our team could not do that.

From Advocacy to Instrumentalisation: The Trinity Legacies Review Working Group

The mechanism for such a process was ultimately arrived at not through the discussions over the library name, but because of a parallel discussion about the return of human remains stolen from the offshore island of Inishbofin by two academics connected with TCD Anthropometric Lab, Alfred Cort Haddon (Royal College of Science) and Andrew Francis Dixon (later Professor of Anatomy, TCD), in the summer of 1890. Trinity's Old Anatomy collections had become the focus of discussions about the repatriation of human remains in Ireland, and in 2009 some Māori remains in the TCD were returned to New Zealand.⁴³ In 2011, communities in the West of Ireland, particularly on Inishbofin, became aware that Trinity's extensive human remains collection included human skulls stolen from their communities by Victorian scientists,

and they began to ask questions about their possible return. These remains were stolen as part of a wider anthropometric project sponsored by, amongst others, the Royal College of Science and The Royal Irish Academy.⁴⁴ We are deliberately using the word 'stolen' here as the evidence from Haddon's own diary unambiguously confirms the stealthy removal of these skulls:

We two climbed over the gate, went down the enclosure which is practically a large graveyard, disturbing some cattle, stumbled along and entered the church, tumbling over the grave stones. In the corner we saw by the dim light the skulls in a recess in the wall. There must have been 40 or more, all broken, mostly useless, but we found a dozen which were worth carrying away, only one however having the face bones. Whilst we were thus engaged we heard 2 men slowly walking along the road and like Brer Fox we lay low and like the Tar Baby, 'kept on saying nothing'. When the coast was clear we put our spoils in the sack and cautiously made our way back to the road. Then it did not matter who saw us. The sailors wanted to take the sack when we got back to the boat but Dixon would not give it up and when asked what was in it said 'Potheen'. So without any further trouble we got the skulls aboard and then we packed them in Dixon's portmanteau and locked it and no one except our two selves had an idea that there are a dozen human skulls on board and they shan't know either.⁴⁵

As researchers interrogating TCD's wider colonial legacies, we were interested not just in how this had happened but also in how these Irish collections fitted into the wider Old Anatomy collection. We identified this college collection in our initial research as likely to have the greatest connections to colonialism and therefore the most significant potential associated legacy issues. After lengthy preliminary discussions about the objectives of our research, we were given access to the 1930s catalogue of the collection of human remains and, using this information, were able to produce a draft map which allowed us to conceive of the global spatial footprint of this collection of c.480 human remains.⁴⁶ Moreover, the inclusion of contemporary correspondence in the catalogue allowed us to identify the provenance of some of the remains in the collection as well as some of the collecting practices used to assemble this collection. Students, staff, alumni and other associates working across the empire regularly dispatched human remains back to Trinity. Skulls obtained and donated from South Africa were classified under the racial categories of Kaffir, Hottentot and Zulu.⁴⁷ Likewise, many of the skulls and skeletons from the Indian Subcontinent are described through markers of caste (Chammar),⁴⁸ religion (Hindu, Mohamedan)⁴⁹ and region (Punjab, Madras).⁵⁰ Correspondence

also highlights that many human remains were taken by stealth and by digging up sacred burial grounds and graveyards. A number of donators acknowledge that human remains were often acquired without the consent and knowledge of origin communities or by contravening local death customs. In 1896, for example, certain Dr N.L. Watts sent the skull of a 'female Lushai' from an Indian 'aboriginal race' to Cunningham for 'anthropological purposes', indicating that the skull may have been damaged in the act of 'digging the ground', and reveals that the skull was transported via tour escorts with 'great difficulty' because the 'Lushai are particular their dead are unmolested'.⁵¹ Human remains were also collected from victims of colonial negligence and violence, including skulls of those who were executed or died from diseases in captivity (like in Rangoon jail) or as a result of famines.⁵² There was no doubt that these researchers were violating not just modern ethical conventions, but those of their own time. There seemed to be a case for the return or repatriation of these remains to their communities of origin where possible.

In 2021, representatives of the island community in Inishbofin had formally requested the return of their remains on the same basis as the return of Māori remains by the college in 2009.⁵³ There were two significant differences this time. The Old Anatomy Steering Group, who manage the collection within the University, were opposed to the return of these remains, arguing both that their origins could be disputed, and that the community were not the appropriate custodians of the collection.⁵⁴ Secondly, repatriation of human remains to another state involves a different process to the return of human remains to a community of origin within the state. There was no precedence for this in Ireland.⁵⁵ Following initial somewhat fraught conversations within the college, which revealed the different approaches to historical evidence and context practised by us as historians working on the TCL project and some colleagues in other fields, the Provost decided to initiate a new Legacies Review Working Group to advise on both the Berkeley Library and Inishbofin issues.

Chaired by the Senior Dean, Professor Eoin O'Sullivan, and featuring representatives from across the University community (including student and trade union representatives as well as all staff grades) alongside two external members, the Working Group initially designed a process whereby these contentious issues might be addressed. It would not be a decision-making committee but would instead inform and advise the Provost, who would then bring options on legacy issues to the University's ultimate decision-making body, the TCD Board. Critically this was to be a transparent process which would allow the participation of all stakeholders in the workings of the review group. The TCL team were tasked with writing scholarly working papers on each issue, changing our role from academic advocates to expert advisors

whose knowledge would contribute to and hopefully enhance the discussion phase. This research element was followed by a public consultation process, including a trip to Inishbofin in November 2022, which allowed the island community to make their voices heard. Members of the college community as well as the wider public were invited to submit evidence-based submissions through the Review Group's website on both the Inishbofin and Berkeley issues.⁵⁶ Having both research and public consultation phases embedded into the structure of the working group enabled crucial information to be shared, which then informed constructive dialogue and allowed for a range of voices to be heard. Opening these submissions to a wider audience emphasised that these would be decisions that would go beyond the confines of the University walls. This led to an impressive array of submissions on both subjects with a broad spectrum of opinions represented. These submissions are still available on the specially commissioned Trinity Legacies website as part of an ongoing commitment to full transparency. The group then reviewed these submissions, and a second version of each working paper (also available online) was produced incorporating the evidence and opinions submitted into the existing document, allowing those submissions to become a visible part of the process.

The Inishbofin submissions were largely supportive of the idea of returning the remains to the island for burial, with only the University's own Old Anatomy Steering Group offering a counter-argument. Their submission argued that the historical evidence could be weighed up against the possibility of future scientific research and for the use of conjecture about the origins of the remains. It did not however carry as much weight within the group's deliberations as either the historical proof of the original theft (in Haddon's diary) or, critically, the request from the community of origin (90 per cent of the island's total population signed a petition) to have their ancestors' skulls returned back to their community graveyard beside the ruins of St Colman's church. This petition demonstrated the community's investment in finding a resolution and how much they considered themselves to be participants in a shared process. In March 2023, following a recommendation from the Legacies Review Working Group, the College Board decided to make a formal apology for Haddon and Dixon's actions and to return the remains to the island, and in July, on the 133rd anniversary of their theft, they were reburied in Inishbofin following a traditional island funeral (Fig. 3.2 and Fig. 3.3).

Completing this process was more complex and contingent than this brief outline indicates. Two elements are worth stressing here. Firstly, that though the desired outcome was achieved, the islanders saw the decision of the University to follow an evidence-based process as frustrating and slow. Some islanders even wondered whether there were 'some people' in Trinity



Fig. 3.2 The funeral procession on Inishbofin, 16 July 2024. (Photograph courtesy of N. Bradshaw)



Fig. 3.3 Inishbofin resident Tommy Burke accepting the return of human remains from the Provost of Trinity College Dublin, Professor Linda Doyle. (Photograph courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin)

'that didn't really want to give them back'.⁵⁷ This perspective should not be minimised and reveals something of the challenges of doing the 'right thing', and how bureaucratic regulations and institutional processes can create misunderstandings about the intentions of even good faith actors.⁵⁸ Secondly, while having its own unique Irish dimensions, this case has potential international ramifications. Similarities can be drawn between the Irish islanders and other groups of people in colonised Europe who were operating within the borders of modern states.⁵⁹

Reading the Inishbofin submissions, it was clear that this was an emotional subject for many of those involved. There were no names attached to the thirteen skulls removed in 1890, but members of the community understood and firmly believed that they were their ancestors. More surprising perhaps was the level of emotion present in the submissions on the renaming or denaming of the Berkeley Library, particularly from those who wanted to preserve the status quo, with some submissions describing the idea of denaming as 'horrible'. There were over ninety submissions regarding the library name with the majority in favour of denaming, followed by a significant number arguing for a 'retain and explain' approach with the minority seeking to preserve the name of the library as it was.⁶⁰ Here we want to focus on two key issues that arose, which have a wider significance. The first of these was how to locate Berkeley's slaveowning activities within the context of his wider career, essentially a question about significance. Connected to this was an argument about whether he was just a 'man of his times'. The second issue we want to briefly address is why denaming should be understood as a contemporary act and how it reflects our current understanding of our past. These issues are linked.

One regular argument for preserving the status quo was that Berkeley's America sojourn was insignificant compared to the wider arc of his career. As became clear in the submissions from leading Berkeley scholars to the process, this is not the modern understanding of experts in this area. Also, and more importantly, it diminishes the significance of his enslaving activities and promotion of a slaveowning ideology on those impacted by it, the enslaved. Their lives matter. This feeds into a regularly articulated argument in contemporary debates about the legacy of slavery – that it was a normal everyday activity. This argument was expertly and robustly demolished in an important submission by Dr Phil Mullen, but it continues to be expressed in the wider public domain. It again removes the perspective of the enslaved. It also ignores how some of Berkeley's contemporaries, including some of his family members, were publicly clear in their opposition to slavery.⁶¹

If the role of historical evidence was essential in debunking such arguments, so too was it in addressing questions about why dename now. We now know

a lot more about the naming decisions that were made in the past and about the evidence available to those who made them. Today we recognise just how significant slavery was in ways societies did not always do so in the past. Our decision-making communities are also different and more representative of our modern diverse population. This was a point made very powerfully in student submissions to the Legacies Review Working Group. Of particular interest are those from students of colour who express their discomfort about the visible presence of a memorial to a prominent enslaver on campus (Luther Lyons, Gabi Fullam). Another student submission (Regan Roseveare) notes how TCD has recently been designated the twelfth most international university in the world and how this stands in contrast to the ongoing memorialisation of Berkeley: 'The issue is whether or not, in 2023, Trinity should continue to lionise a man who used his wealth to perpetuate the enslavement of human beings.' A contribution from a recent alumnus, Sarah McAleese, likewise notes, 'as a University that claims to inspire the next generation of global citizens and leaders, we have a duty to engage critically with our past and change when necessary'.

This focus on values is picked up across a number of the submissions. Dr Phil Mullen (School of Social Sciences and Philosophy) noted how the make-up and values of the college community have changed since the original decision to name the library after Berkeley in 1978: 'Trinity College Dublin in 2023 is a different institution to its 1978 incarnation that named the library. It possesses different institutional values and strategic goals, a more diverse staff and student composition and access to a wider and more informed knowledge base.' A similar point was made by Professor Ruth Karras (Lecky Professor of History):

The library was named in 1978. It is thus not part of a very long tradition in the larger scheme of things. People weren't asking the kinds of questions in the 1970s as they are now, but situations change. In terms of holding onto Trinity's traditions as the oldest university in Ireland, the name of this library is very much a late addition.

Professor Siobhan Garrigan, Loyola Chair of Theology, meanwhile in her submission drew attention to the College's current statement of values, writing: 'Any decision we make today should reflect today's values, especially our core value of equality.' She also argued that to dename is to take 'responsibility for the harms that institutions like ours casually inflict and deny... by requiring students to work in spaces named after slave-owners, institutionalising racism again and again. Owning our privilege involves owning the history, good and bad, that produced it.'

This recognition of the importance of our present understanding of the past was essential to the Legacy Review Group's decision to offer a preferred option to the provost: to dename the library. The choice to dename was about our commemorative practices and what the contemporary twenty-first-century university chooses to remember. The TCD Board formally agreed to support the provost's proposal to dename the library in April 2023, declaring the current name was 'inconsistent with the University's core values'. This decision was widely covered in national and international media, with mostly positive coverage. Reports in the American press – both the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times* carried the story – led to questions being posed to the University of California about whether they had any plans to rename their campus.⁶² These were politely batted away. As with the coverage of the return of the Inishbofin skulls, there was little depth to most of the reporting and the University was initially reluctant to link the denaming to our wider research project and to Trinity's broader colonial legacies, though this would be addressed when a dedicated 'legacies' section was added to the front page of the University's website in Autumn 2023. There was however no mention of any form of reparative justice, something which some critics of the denaming proposals had highlighted as an issue in their submissions to the Legacy Review Group as part of a critique that the denaming process was part of a 'woke' agenda. In response to some criticism in the national press and from the online commentariat, the provost made a robust statement that this was not just about cancel culture or gesture politics.⁶³

The Berkeley Library story did not end with the decision to dename. The decision to dename included a commitment to address the other elements of Berkeley's material legacies in the University. A 'retain and explain' approach was adopted to deal with the Berkeley memorial window in the College chapel. This echoed both the tenor of the public submissions and neatly resolved any potential planning issues related to the alteration of a protected structure. Meanwhile the hanging of multiple portraits of Berkeley in public spaces is to be reconsidered as part of a wider rethinking of the display of the College's art collection. Finally, the Department of Classics has decided to rename a gold medal funded by a donation from Berkeley himself which had previously been awarded to the highest performing student in Ancient Greek. The library remains without a name, but as we write in spring 2024, an ongoing public consultation has received over 850 submissions regarding a new name. This renaming process is transparent and public-facing, building on the success of the shared authority model used in the denaming stage.

Conclusion

How has Trinity College dealt with problematic or complex heritage issues arising from its colonial past, and what difference has TCL made? Participating in this process has given us as historians a greater insight into the way our historical expertise can be used to shape current debates, how it can be misunderstood and how it can be instrumentalised to portray particular political messages. This has meant that we, as historical researchers working in the public and talking to members across and external to the University, remain cognisant that our understandings and review of evidence may differ from other disciplines. In many ways, our role became an explanatory one alongside one of opening up dialogue. For instance, with some colleagues in STEM, we had to think carefully about how to demonstrate that scientific disciplines and collections, from botany and zoology to anatomy, were not merely objects of neutral scientific study but were formed through, and enabled by, colonial encounters, dispossession and colonial forms of labour. Thus, one of the key lessons learnt was how to listen effectively and account for different levels of knowledge. We also had to be mindful of generational shifts amongst the College fellows and staff, shifts based around complex and, at times, conflicting understandings of university priorities, ethics and duties of care for students. This was a critical lesson for us; understanding conflicting motivations at play within institutions which often play out in ways that those external to the University may not be aware of.

Throughout the project, we also kept returning to critical questions around positionality, who is doing the work to uncover and trace colonial legacies and why is this important? The team has been in contact with the students in our role as teachers and through the work of public history interns from the M.Phil in Public History and Cultural Heritage. We have all developed modules arising from the project and embedded its findings and questions into the undergraduate curriculum. The team has also engaged with the Student Union, the President of whom is on the TCL Advisory Board. These conversations were crucial for the work we were doing in tracing colonial legacies into the present. One of the challenges of listening to student voices was reconciling our roles as invested parties, as individuals and historians, who do not have decision-making discretion with the demands of students who wanted swift, tangible changes. Moving forward, it would be useful to think of ways to proceed with having these discussions and embedding student voices within the project in a productive way as well as to think critically about how our work can inform decolonising curricula across the University.

The TCL project has been defined by a high level of transparency, and in order to achieve meaningful outcomes our team has had to change the way we work 'with' and 'for' the institution, all the while recording our work in the public domain. Such work brings a great deal of pressure. In the service of this work we have been interviewed in media outlets, by external documentary makers, and have presented our thoughts and ideas in both internal and external contexts. Resourcing such projects can be a difficult prospect for university administration, but an ad-hoc approach is freighted with risk. This project was overseen by two historians working alongside a precariously employed postdoctoral researcher for an initial two-year period. This has left Trinity with another problem to solve. How should the University integrate the useful critique that has arisen from our work in a sustainable way, beyond the Legacies working group and our publications? The answer may lie in collaborative, interdisciplinary work. Working within the institution that we are investigating involved working with librarians and archivists at Trinity's Manuscripts and Archives and contending with silences, absences and imbedded structures within archives and archive formation.⁶⁴ Discussions about university collections reminded us that historians cannot work in silos when undertaking institutional work and also highlighted, again, that in order to contend with individual institutional legacies, we need to attend to the wider structures and pedagogical connections between imperial universities. Again, for this work to be done effectively, there needs to be cross-institutional and multilevel buy-in and collaborations sustained by long-term resources and funding.

Overall, the work done by TCL has, of course, its constraints. Symbolically important apologies, a transparent process and stakeholder engagement have all been positive features of the University's response to colonial legacies and complex heritage, whereas reparation, compensation and redress have all been a minimal part of the University's response to the issues raised by TCL. We envisage the Legacies Review Group playing a long-term and ever-more important role in sustaining institutional interrogation and moving towards meaningful forms of redress and reparation. Some of these future practices and processes will be informed by the ever-changing landscape across Ireland's museums, universities, local government and heritage spaces.⁶⁵

Notes

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25. *A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches*, 4. For some contemporary doubts about the likely effectiveness of this policy see S. Gaustad Edwin, *George Berkeley in America* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1979), 44–45. It is worth noting that the first beneficiary of the Berkeley medal at Yale was Eleazar Wheelock, later president of Dartmouth, which had as part of its founding mission the education of native Americans.
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31. Deed of Conveyance between Berkeley and Yale College, 26 July 1732 (Beinecke Library, Berkeley Papers), which established the Berkeley graduate scholarships at Yale with funds generated in perpetuity from the Whitehall estate. The current lease granted by Yale to tenants expires in the year 2761. See also Blight, *Yale and Slavery*, 60–63.
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