

The name of the Berkeley Library

Summary

I understand that students have made a petition to remove the name of George Berkeley from the new library because of his involvement with slavery. This has opened a useful discussion but if accepted I suspect that it will not accomplish what I would like to see – a significant contribution by Trinity College to the rectification of wrongs that still permeate western society. Moreover it would do great damage to the works of one of the great scholars of this College. It would contradict the fundamental commitment of Trinity College to a system of education which emphasises that knowledge and ideas are produced and assessed by scholars – it is not possible to separate the “*dancer from dance*”. In this tradition we draw attention to and commemorate great thinkers, among whom Berkeley is one the very few from Trinity whose reputation is secure and likely to endure in the academic world. We name buildings and commission portraits and choose particular works, to encourage students to learn from others *how* to become scholars, in particular how to become critical thinkers.

Berkeley is a preeminent example of a person who spent his life seeking answers to some of the most puzzling questions that we can imagine in philosophy and science, and who took a serious interest in promoting the welfare of society.

His reputation offers us a way of drawing attention to slavery. Removing his name from the Library will hide rather than expose his connection with slavery.

The prominence of the Berkeley Library gives us an opportunity [pamphlets, posters, symposia, scholarships, websites etc] to promote a greater understanding of Berkeley as a philosopher, scientist, missionary, social thinker, and pastoral bishop [for 20 years]

including his ideas on slavery. His status as a scholar should not be diminished by his social thinking, which was not exceptional by the standards of his times.

The naming of the Library offers Trinity a logical and enduring way of promoting discussion of slavery and Ireland [Frederick Douglass, Daniel O’Connell, John Mitchell, John Kells Ingram etc].

I add one specific proposal, that we establish one or more scholarships to be awarded to graduates of The Berkeley Institute, Bermuda.

George Berkeley – some amateur thoughts

I offer these comments on Berkeley with hesitation – I am not a scholar of Berkeley. In balancing this reluctance, I can say that I have been interested in his work on perception since I was introduced to it at school. I came to realise that Berkeley is one of the most original and influential graduates of my college. In the last 50 years the genetics of perception has become one of the most important in my field of genetics.

Berkeley stands with a small number of Irish thinkers and writers who have made enduring contributions to the intellectual world that are so distinctive, powerful, and difficult that they are unlikely ever to be forgotten. He is best known for his theory of immaterialism, that there is no material world without mind – *esse est percipi* – *to be is to be perceived*. He wrote on many subjects, including optics and mathematics, in ways that still interest authorities in science and mathematics as well as philosophy. He disputed the ideas of some of the greatest philosophers, including Descartes, Locke and Hobbes, and the greatest scientists, including Newton and Leibniz. He is said to have influenced Hume and Kant directly.

Tom Jones in *George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life* [2021], wove the stories of the man with the stories of his ideas, writing that Berkeley was *the most significant proponent of the philosophical doctrine of immaterialism*.

His reputation as a philosopher, who studied and taught at Trinity, where he began his most influential works while a Fellow of the College – his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* was published in 1710 when he was 25 - was the main reason for naming the new Library after him. In doing this we were celebrating a great thinker – who incidentally had once been The Librarian of the College and had been involved in the planning of what we now call The Old Library.

Berkeley, Swift, Burke, Hamilton and Beckett and perhaps a few other Trinity graduates, produced works that are likely to remain widely known throughout the academic world. By naming our new Library after Berkeley we were giving a strong signal of the commitment of Trinity College Dublin to the celebration of original and independent scholarship and creativity of the most demanding and challenging kind, whether in the arts or teaching, learning or research. We were and are reminding everyone who sees the name and finds out about him that Berkeley was a scholar of the highest renown and the greatest importance – he should make us think.

I was lucky to be introduced to Berkeley's immaterialism while still at school by Dr Rex Cathcart who I believe had been awarded his PhD for his studies on how Marxists, the ultimate materialists, dealt with Berkeley, the most uncompromising of the immaterialists. This study was carried out under the supervision of the Trinity Berkeley scholar Dr. A. A. Luce. Luce published *The works of George Berkeley* (9 vols, 1948–57) and *The Life of George Berkeley* (1949). He also supervised the research of Dr. David Berman, the noted contemporary Trinity authority on Berkeley.

I cannot offer anything like an authoritative commentary on Berkeley but I do understand why he has become a seminal figure in studies of *perception*, now a subject of great interest in neurogenetics, a special

interest in Trinity. He earns a mention from time to time because he was one of the people who thought deeply and with originality about the nature of perception just at the dawn of modern science – after Newton [physics] but before Lavoisier [chemistry] or Darwin and Mendel [biology].

I was intrigued by Berkeley. Though I side with Johnson – *I refute him thus* - and I am a materialist for reasons that are based on my education as a scientist, I suspect that Berkeley's immaterialism is logically difficult if not impossible to refute by formal logic.

Berkeley puzzles people to this day including for example neuroscientists such as Roger Sperry and Richard Gregory – what is perception and how do we perceive? Sperry obtained evidence that the two sides of our brains differ in their powers of perception and that our two “brains” do different things – what would Berkeley make of that? Does the split brain hypothesis help to refute him? Gregory took advantage of wonderful modern surgery that gave sight to a person who was blind from birth, to ask whether he would be able to distinguish objects with his new found sight that he had previously known from touch. And so on Berkeley is referenced at <https://www.discovery.org/podcast/neuroscience-quantum-physics-and-the-nature-of-reality/>, a discussion of Neuroscience, Quantum Physics, and the Nature of Reality. I give these examples to illustrate the respect that is shown to Berkeley in studies of the brain, the most difficult, most important and least understood field in fundamental biology.

The greatest challenge about the brain is how to explain human language. Berkeley knew this was the quality in which “*men differ from Beasts*”. He saw the difference as “*by Degrees of more and less*”. This idea that language varies by degrees is the nub of the problem for modern science and will be one source of the answer – we differ from chimpanzees in our capacity for language, the differences emerging “by degrees” through Darwinian evolution over the 7 million years since we and chimps diverged from our common

ancestor. Berkeley's interest in language, as with so many things, was inquisitive, intense, insightful and profound.

As for Berkeley's physics – he challenged Newton and I think Leibniz, on whether space and time are absolute. Einstein showed Berkeley was right. He was puzzled by the concept of infinity and the infinitesimal, and the meaningfulness of negative numbers – his curiosity was disciplined yet boundless.

Impressed by Newton's *Opticks: or, A treatise of the reflections, refractions, inflexions and colours of light* he debated the meaning of colour – what does it mean to say that something is blue or green? Is there something called blueness without there being an observer? What would he say today if he were told that Yes ! there is – it is light of a wavelength between about 450 and 495 nanometres. I suspect he would stick to his guns - he might ask what is light if there is no one to observe it. Berkeley's first major book was *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* published in 1709 when he was 24.

For those who know of George Berkeley, the name of the Library shows his association with Trinity; for those who do *or* do not, seeing his name on our Library should encourage people to find out more about him. Who is this person, what did he do, what did he write, what did he believe? Are his ideas interesting? Why are some more convincing than others? Do they lead to other interesting questions? Was he a good person, by the standards of his times? Why should we in the *modern* world pay any attention to this person or his ideas, creatures of the early 18th century? What was it about him that caused him to be noted in the name of a fine new building on the Trinity campus?

I often hear the tour guides tell the visitors that the University of California Berkeley, and thus the city, were named after him, and we know that he is remembered in other ways in universities around the world. Harvard and Yale were delighted to receive books from him.

It is less well known that 11 black citizens on Bermuda founded The Berkeley Institute in 1879 to provide secondary education for black students, welcoming boys and girls, of all ethnic backgrounds – the word black is used on their website. Today it is one of two secondary schools in Bermuda with more than 500 students. I suggest that Trinity College establish a scholarship limited to graduates of The Berkeley Institute.

There must be something special about Berkeley. And of course there was and is – he was and remains one of the most remarkable thinkers of the modern age.

Berkeley was convinced that intellectual enquiry and education were central to the promotion of welfare, morality and good citizenship, as he saw them, in his time. He wanted people to be well-educated. He had a lifelong interest in improving the spiritual and general welfare of everyone – he was a devout Anglican, who wanted everyone to become believers in the same religion, which he was convinced would lead them to a better life and salvation. This may seem strange to many of us in this secular and materialist age but by all accounts he was sincere in this – he was a missionary of his time.

We are now being asked to reconsider the name of The Berkeley Library, primarily because Berkeley bought and owned slaves while living in Rhode Island 1729-1731. In essence we are being asked to use modern standards to condemn Berkeley for living in the 18th century with his contemporary standards.

I read the *Working Paper on Berkeley's Legacies at Trinity [Dr Mobeen Hussain, Dr Ciaran O'Neill and Dr Patrick Walsh]* November 2022 with great interest. It describes two aspects of Berkeley's life: firstly the "historical evidence on Bishop Berkeley's slave-owning activities and his ideological support for the slave system and settler colonialism" – which has never been denied and was well known - and secondly "the different forms of memorialisation of Berkeley by successive generations in TCD."

This paper says little about Berkeley's intellectual legacy – a reader would have no idea why Berkeley has been honoured across the world for 300 years.

My first suggestion to the Committee is that it should commission one or more papers on the intellectual and other legacies of Berkeley. They might ask Dr. David Berman to address the Committee.

As to the name of the Library, it would be a travesty of all Trinity stands for today, in essence its commitment to intellectual enquiry, to write Berkeley out of our history – that would be similar to writing out the names of Aristotle, Plato and many of the classical authors, and the names of Hume and Kant and others from our courses on philosophy, all those having favoured or been equivocal about slavery. The citizens of the United States would be doing the same disservice to the complexity of human life, were they to write out the names of Washington and Jefferson from their pantheon. Washington owned slaves up to his death. Jefferson was an enthusiastic slave-owner, who fathered up to six children with Sally Hemmings his so-called house slave, as established by DNA evidence in 1998.

Should we in Ireland remove the name of John Mitchell, living a century after Berkeley, an extreme racist who did all he could to support the Confederacy. His name is associated with many GAA clubs.

I learned from the paper to the Working Group that it was George Dawson, my teacher, colleague and friend, who proposed that the New Library be named after Berkeley. This does not surprise me. Besides being a fine geneticist, Dawson was an authority on art, especially on modern art. In discussing science, art, or indeed anything else, Dawson insisted that we are better able to understand ideas or works of any kind if we learn about the people who were or are connected with them. He believed that knowing about and criticising the people behind the science, or art or music or literature, could inspire others to devote their lives to great problems or projects. I followed him in referring as much as possible in my teaching and research to the people who were responsible for important

developments in genetics, and I am certain that this has helped many of my students to pursue ambitious intellectual careers. It is likely that none of these eminent geneticists was without faults, even by the standards of our times. In some cases their personal opinions on social matters influenced their science.

I am pleased that Trinity is reviewing the way in which it has commemorated George Berkeley. We can choose to write his name out of our history, because he thought and wrote about slavery, and owned slaves, which was commonplace in the 1720s and for the next 100 years. Slavery and serfdom were not abolished in Europe until the middle of the 1800s – as was well-described in the notable book by the Trinity scholar John Kells Ingram, F.T.C.D. [see below].

Or we can use Berkeley's name and reputation, the story of this man and his eminence to promote discussion of slavery and Ireland.

In my opinion it would be completely wrong to take his name off the New Library, or to take down his portraits, or to remove the Berkeley Window from the Chapel. Instead we should do much more to explain why Berkeley has been so influential in philosophy, science and mathematics. And we should explain and critically assess his religious, social and economic ideas, including slavery.

The discussion to date has made many of us think more deeply about slavery. Will these ruminations be a passing thought? We should try to find a way of making sure this question is not forgotten in Trinity, and use what we find out to promote equality of esteem today.

I hope the discussion of Berkeley will help us to keep slavery at the forefront of our thinking and that of succeeding generations – we owe it to those who still suffer the consequences of that horrendous practice that was common in western civilisation [*sic*] from the Ancient Greeks to the late 19th century, to never forget slavery as we Europeans should never forget other great stains on our civilisation – the discrimination against women, religious intolerance seen at its extreme in the Holocaust, and the slaughter of millions under Stalin, come to mind. One thing is clear, that we should focus more efforts on dealing with the consequences of these horrors in the modern

world rather than superficially re-writing the history. Taking a name off a library is much easier than finding ways of making sure people understand slavery and never forget it.

Conclusion

Most people have never heard of Berkeley. The Berkeley Library, with its name in place, seen by thousands of students, by millions of Irish citizens, and by more than a million visitors, offers an opportunity to introduce people to the person and ideas of George Berkeley, *and* to the intellectual and social challenges which he addressed, including slavery, many of which have not been properly addressed and rectified to this day. Berkeley should be studied and criticised as a remarkable thinker and doer, not forgotten. We can do more for slavery by discussing him than by erasing his name.

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Appendix: John Kells Ingram and Slavery

I am grateful to Dr. Denis Weaire, FRS, for drawing my attention to the work of John Kells Ingram, FTCD [1823-1907] on slavery. This may be known to the Working Group.

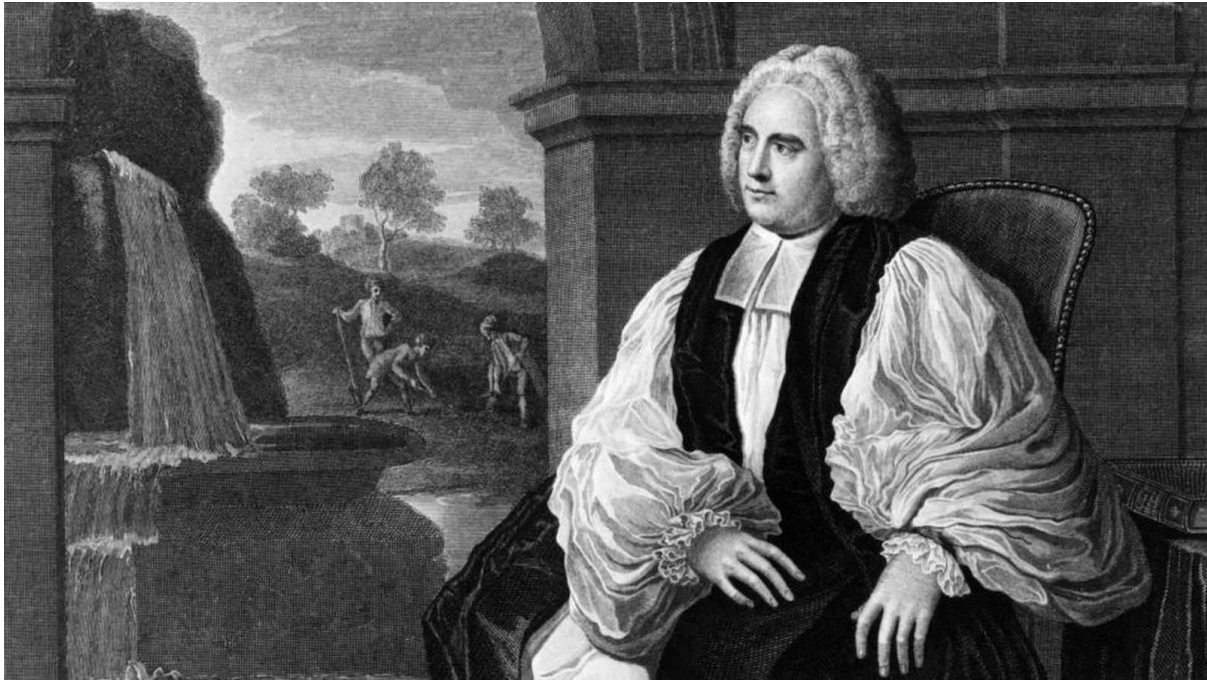
Ingram was an eminent scholar, holding chairs of Oratory, English and Greek, who is known in Ireland for his poem *The Memory of the Dead*, with the opening line, *Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?* This was published in *The Nation* in 1843. His career, including his contributions to the study of economics for which he was renowned, is well told in a fine Trinity Monday Discourse by Dr. Dean Barrett, FTCD, which can be read in *Hermathena 164: 5-30, 1998*.

Ingram was known for his writings on slavery. He contributed the articles on slavery to the 9th, 10th and 11th editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

His *History of Slavery and Serfdom* [Adam & Charles Black, London 1895; Macmillan, New York 1895] was a major piece of work, in which he surveyed the institution of slavery from the ancient world to his own time. It was translated into 11 languages, and was used as a textbook into the early 1920s. It has been republished several times, it is still in print, and is available on line. He summarised his opinion of colonial slavery as *politically as well as morally a monstrous aberration* [which] *never produced anything but evil*.

Erasing Berkeley's name from Trinity would do nothing to combat racial prejudice in Ireland

Nigel Biggar: In celebrating people, we admire them only for some things they've done



Irish philosopher George Berkeley. Photograph: Hulton Archive

Nigel Biggar

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Ireland's famous 18th century philosopher, George Berkeley, was guilty of racial prejudice and slave – owning. He once described the Irish poor as “a lazy destitute race” and he bought a slave plantation on Rhode Island. Since the Irish today deplore both racism and slavery, shouldn't they disown him? Trinity College Dublin's legacies working group is currently weighing whether his name should be removed from one of the college libraries.

What's wrong with “racism” is what's wrong with any prejudice directed at other people – whether they are members of a race, a nation, a social class, a religion, or the body of Brexit supporters – namely, that it prejudices the individual by regarding him or her simply as a member of a group, automatically attributing to the individual that group's supposed characteristics, which are stereotyped in unflattering terms.

The group is simplified pejoratively and the dignity of individuality is brushed aside. Racial prejudice is an ugly thing and Bishop Berkeley was guilty of it.

British and Irish slave-trading and slavery from about 1650 was nothing out of the ordinary

But let's be frank: prejudice against other groups and their members is a widespread human phenomenon. Human individuals like to secure their own significance by being part of a larger tribe, and they like to inflate that significance by looking down upon other tribes. Even university-educated 'progressives' have their tribal prejudices.

Further, racism was neither invented by Europeans nor monopolised by them. In the medieval period Muslim Arabs compared their own cultural sophistication favourably to what seemed to them the primitive cultures of white northern Europeans and black Africans, attributing their natural inferiority to an intemperate climate, respectively too cold and too hot. In the nineteenth century the Qing emperors in China regarded the British – and other Westerners – as barbarians and natural vassals, without any embarrassment at all.

In the 1940s the Irish novelist, Gerald Hanley, then an officer in the British Army, found Somalis unshakeable in their prejudice against other black peoples: "I had once tried hard to get the Somalis to give up their contempt for Bantu people ... 'We cannot obey slaves', Somalis told me. 'It is impossible for us to live under slave people even when they are in [British] uniform and have arms'. I could not change the memory [the Somalis] had of a time when these Bantu people were slave material for the Muslim world to the north".

According to Dr [Clare Moriarty](#), while "unquestionably a great metaphysical thinker and a brilliant writer", Berkeley "was also extremely morally fallible". Welcome to the common club of crooked humanity.

As for slavery, that was practiced from ancient times to the 20th century on every continent in a variety of forms. Long before Europeans became involved in the 1440s, Africans had been selling black slaves to Roman and Arab traders. In the mid-1600s Barbary corsairs raided the coasts of Co Cork and Cornwall and carted off whole villages into slavery on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa.

While the British were importing slaves into the Americas in the eighteenth-century, the indigenous Comanche were running a slave economy in the southwest of North America.

Berkeley has never been venerated for his racist views of the Irish poor and slave-ownership, to repudiate him would not be to repudiate them

In Jamaica the Maroons, slaves who had escaped into the mountainous forests of the interior, kept slaves of their own in the mid-1700s. And in North Carolina freed slaves were themselves slave-owners on the eve of the Civil War in 1860. British and Irish slave-trading and slavery from about 1650 was nothing out of the ordinary.

What was extraordinary was that from about 1770 – two decades after George Berkeley's death – an anti-slavery movement began to grow in Britain. The result was that, through their united Parliament, the British and Irish were among the first peoples in the history of the world to repudiate the slave-trade and slavery in 1807 and 1833, respectively, and they were the leading people to devote themselves to the global suppression of slavery through the British Empire for the following century-and-a-half.

It follows that there is no direct causal line between the ugly racism that justified 18th century slavery and whatever racism persists among us today, because the highly popular abolition movement and its humanitarian successors were propelled by the Christian conviction that members of all races are equal in the sight of God.

Consequently, according to the historian of abolition, John Stauffer, “almost every United States black who travelled in the British Isles acknowledged the comparative dearth of racism there. [The famous black abolitionist] Frederick Douglass noted after arriving in England in 1845: ‘I saw in every man a recognition of my manhood, and an absence, a perfect absence, of everything like that disgusting hate with which we are pursued in [the United States]’”.

Therefore, to erase Berkeley’s name from TCD would do nothing to combat racial prejudice in Ireland today. Since he has never been venerated for his racist views of the Irish poor and slave-ownership, to repudiate him would not be to repudiate them. In celebrating people, we admire them only for some things they’ve done. We admire Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King as heroic examples of non-violent resistance – despite, respectively, their disparaging view of Africans and serial infidelity.

So, we should continue to celebrate George Berkeley as the outstanding philosopher he was. And when provoked by his name to reflect on his prejudices and obtuseness, we should lament them. But then we should spare some critical attention for our own moral flaws. That would make a difference.

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