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British Descendant of Slave-Owning Family Apologizes to Grenada, Contributes \$120,000 to Community Economic Development Fund

Caribbean / **Published On March 01, 2023 07:14 AM /**

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BBC reporter Laura Trevelyan.

The descendants of an English family that held over a thousand enslaved Africans and forced them to labor on six plantations throughout Grenada, have now apologized for their family's actions.

During a reparations forum hosted by the Grenada National Reparations Committee and the University of the West Indies on Monday, BBC reporter Laura Trevelyan, whose forebears owned plantations in three different Grenadian parishes in the 18th and 19th centuries, read and presented an apology letter to Prime Minister Dicko Mitchell.

The letter was signed by seven members of her family, and read in part “To the people of Grenada, we the undersigned write to apologize for the actions of our ancestors in holding your ancestors in slavery,” as it went on to describe slavery as a crime against humanity.

“Its damaging effects continue to this present day,” the letter continued. “We repudiated our ancestors’ involvement in it; we apologize to the surviving descendants of the enslaved on those estates, for the continuing impact on their daily lives, their health, and their well-being.”

Apart from the apology, the ceremony included the launch of a fund into which Ms. Trevelyan personally committed to contributing £100,000 (\$120,000) to the local reparations committee.

Trevelyan said in 2013, she learned that her family had kept enslaved people on their properties in Grenada, and with that knowledge, came guilt.

John Dower, another Trevelyan family member, stood beside Ms. Trevelyan as she delivered the apology.

“We urge the British government to enter into meaningful negotiations with the governments of the Caribbean in order to make appropriate reparations through CARICOM, and bodies such as the Grenada National Reparations Commission,” Dower remarked.

Prime Minister Mitchell gave his commitment to continuing the fight for reparations, saying “slavery wasn’t ended overnight and the fight for reparations is going to be a long, hard and difficult fight, but it is a fight that we owe to our ancestors, because they never accepted slavery as normal. They never accepted that their position in life was to be slaved and so as freeman we owe it to them to ensure that their fight for dignity for the horizontal acceptance of humanity remains our fight and the next generation of Caribbean citizens’ fight as well.”

He noted his acceptance of the apology letter on behalf of Grenada, before presenting it to members of the local Reparations Committee, who are expected to turn it over to the regional reparations committee.

Arley Gill, chair of Grenada’s Reparations Committee, described the occasion as a day of remembrance. “It is finally a day of recognition of the harms of slavery and a moment of global reckoning that is long overdue. ... This apology and financial commitment from Laura and the Trevelyan family should serve as a clarion call to other families, institutions, and other governments in Europe to acknowledge wrongs, apologize and commit to repairing the harms done by their ancestors,” Gill said.

Chair of the CARICOM Reparations Committee, Professor Sir Hilary Beckles called the Trevelyan ancestors “leading architects” and an “essential part of the slavocracy of this world.”

Following the abolition of slavery, Sir Hilary noted, “The enslavers dominated the British parliament. They were the legislators. So the enslavers raided the British Treasury of £20m pounds to pay themselves. It was the largest ever expenditure taken by the British parliament.” The University of the West Indies Vice Chancellor compared giving compensation to the slaveholders to offering bank robbers rewards for their crimes, saying that reparations are a return of resources, not a handout.

Trevelyan’s family received £3 million in 1834 as compensation for the loss of the enslaved people that they considered property. This is the approximate equivalent of almost half a billion pounds in today’s currency, according to more than one inflation calculator.

Earlier this month, Ms. Trevelyan told the BBC, “For me to be giving £100,000 almost 200 years later for a fund that’s going to look at economic development in Grenada and the eastern Caribbean, maybe that seems like it’s inadequate. ... But I hope that we’re setting an example.”

On Monday, she explained how she came up with the £100,000 sum. “At this moment in time, that is what I can afford to give. I am 54 years old, and when I turn 55 in August, that is the moment when I can actually give this money because I will come into a pension from the BBC, and so I am taking a portion of the pension as a cash payment to give to the people of Grenada, but I hope in years to come...I will be in a position to give more money, and I hope that it works and achieve what all of us here want it to achieve.”

While the ceremony progressed, a group of people who did not support the ceremony and financial commitment by the Trevelyan family staged a peaceful protest outside the building.

The protestors said they viewed the event as “tokenism” to the reparation initiative, amounting to nothing more than a public relations exercise.