

# The Medlicott Medal 2024 will be awarded to Professor Catherine Hall



Catherine Hall is Emerita Professor of Modern British Social and Cultural History at University College London. She has a long-established academic record in feminist history and empire and post-colonial history. She was a professor of history at UCL during a key development period and was the principal director of two key research projects that led to the creation of the Legacies of British Slave Ownership Centre, also at UCL. The outcome of those projects and the centre was the creation of a database that was the culmination of a huge research project which enabled anyone of any background, race or identity to explore their own personal connections to the slave societies of the Caribbean.

Her contribution to history and to the understanding of an individual's own

relationship to the people and communities of the past is one of the most important for modern history. Through her work and collaboration over the decades she has been responsible for helping to establish feminist and gender history in the UK. She then went on to create one of the most ambitious, yet important research projects on the histories of race and slavery for modern historians. Importantly all of her work is not just for the world of universities but is fundamental in shaping public discourse and knowledge about daily life and interpersonal relations, across time and in the present, for all those living in modern Britain.

***“We cannot put right all the wrongs of the past, but we can explore their legacies in the present: how can some people be considered dispensable?”***

She was born in Kettering, but her family moved to Leeds when she was three years old. She is widely reported as growing up in a nonconformist household with radical left parents. This helped to shape her way of questioning the world and how the past

is interpreted and presented. She studied at Sussex University and Birmingham before going on to work at Northeast London Polytechnic, Essex University and later at UCL.

In preparation for her talk at the awards evening in July when she will be presented with the medal, we caught up with her to talk about her career.

We asked: What are your motivations as a historian?

*History can help us with a rethinking of the present.*

*Gender history had no recognition, no basis in the universities of the 1970s. And we were establishing a field that had not been understood. We had to fight to establish the area completely. That is where my first big book came in, *Family Fortunes* co-authored with Leonore Davidoff, published in 1987. It told the story of the centrality of gender difference to the making of the middle-class society in the late 18th and early 19th century. It is about analysing British society. Class tells you only half the story. What is expected of men and what is expected of women is a major factor.*

*After that and as someone married to a Jamaican man – she was married to academic Stuart Hall – and as a parent to mixed race children, I began to work*

on the centrality of race to British society and particularly the making of whiteness.

The story that has often been told is that Britain had no direct connection with slavery, with the Caribbean, an idea that the 'race issue' is about the US – I wanted to unpick that.

My husband was Jamaican, and we went there to visit. We went to a village out there called Kettering and I suddenly realised that it was not just his history but mine.

When I came back there were all these questions. For my research I focused on Birmingham where we lived, and Jamaica, and I opened the question 'What did Britain know about slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries?' – The answer is a lot. Professor Hall produced a number of books and articles that investigated, examined, and explored the relationship between Britain and Jamaica as well as the relationships between the peoples.

She describes her work as 'rethinking the relation between Britain and empire in the early/mid-nineteenth century. It reflects on the ways in which metropolitan ideas and practices have been shaped by the colonial experience. Some of my work has focused on the long relationship between England and Jamaica (*Civilising Subjects: metropole and colony in the English imagination 1830–1867* [2002]).'<sup>i</sup>

The Legacies Project at UCL was of course a team project with a number of researchers and academics involved. Nonetheless it was created under her direction and with her drive. However, she explained that there are over 1,000 entries that came from the public:

The Pandora's Box that we opened up was quite incredible. I think we really made a difference, which you can't always say in the field of history. We created a set of tools that people can really do something with – schools, colleges, art galleries, museums, etc.

Rugby School is involved with investigating its own archives using this tool. At the time of the slave trade and slave ownership in Jamaica, Newnham College had not even been created, but many connections have still been found to that period, its people and themselves.

But what all these connections show us is how ordinary these connections were.

I would never argue that slavery caused the industrial revolution or anything that crude, but it played a part.

She explained that she believes that:

History writing can play a part in the work of repair. We cannot put right all the wrongs of the past, but we can explore their legacies in the present: how can some people be considered dispensable? Why are some lives valued more than others?

## **“For my research I focused on Birmingham where we lived, and Jamaica, and I opened the question ‘What did Britain know about slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries?’”**

Professor Hall has a new book out in 2024, *Lucky Valley: Edward Long and the history of racial capitalism* published with Cambridge University Press.

Edward Long was the great historian of Jamaica in the 18th century, his whole purpose was to legitimise slavery. He creates a story of how slavery and mercantile capitalism meshed together. His book *The History of Jamaica is 250 years old, yet it is still in print.*

What does that tell us about the enduring legacy of both slavery and a need to justify it?

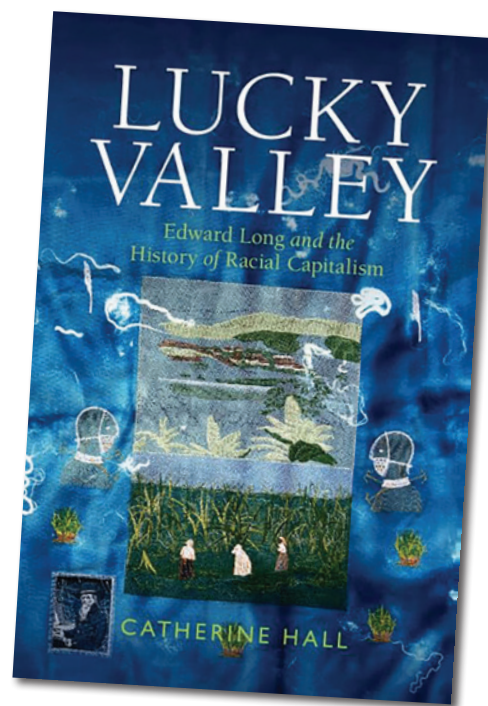
Finally, we talked about the Medicott. After all she has received other awards for history. In 2021 the British Academy awarded her its Leverhulme Medal and Prize – 'for the impact her scholarship has made across modern and contemporary British history, particularly in the fields of class, gender, empire and postcolonial history'.<sup>ii</sup>

I was thrilled to get the Medicott Medal. I am very happy to be recognised as a public historian. I believe in speaking beyond the academics, and in asking questions. I love working with teachers and the wider public. So, an award from the Historical Association seems to appreciate that I do that and enjoy it.

For the Historical Association, awarding the Medal to Professor Hall was an easy choice. Her contribution to historical study is currently ground-breaking – in the future we expect it will be regarded as pivotal for establishing a 21st-century discourse and rethink on postcolonial identities and narratives for all those studying history from the 18th century onwards.

The medal will be awarded to Professor Hall on 10 July 2024 at the Historical Association annual awards evening in London. Those awarded the medal are asked to give a lecture or talk on an area of their historical scholarship or an area of issue in history that they feel is worthy of special attention. The event is open for HA members to attend.

The Historical Association Medicott Medal is awarded annually for outstanding services and contributions to history. The award seeks to recognise individuals from a diversity of backgrounds in their service to history. Past recipients of the medal are all distinguished and outstanding individuals in their fields, whether through scholarship in the sense of original research, publication through specialist writing and lecturing, popularisation of history through writing, TV or radio, or through their teaching. Previous recipients include Rana Mitter, Bethany Hughes, David Olusoga and Mary Beard.



<sup>i</sup> Catherine Hall | Legacies of British Slavery (ucl.ac.uk)

<sup>ii</sup> Profile: Interview with Professor Catherine Hall | UCL News – UCL – University College London