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Contents -

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Book review: Johnson's Dictionary by Professor David Dabydeen pgs 2-23

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Johnson's Dictionary

by

David Dabydeen¹



Picture 1: Book Cover. Source - Google

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Book review by Sally Ramage

Introduction

David Dabydeen's eighth novel, *Johnson's Dictionary*, was written during his stay in Beijing, China, where he has been residing for the past three years, Ambassador to China, representing the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, South America (whilst, in turn, China has an Embassy and Ambassador in Guyana, Mr. Yu Wenzhe).² Guyana is the first English-speaking Caribbean country to establish diplomatic relations with China, and this has laid a solid foundation for the bilateral relationship between the two republics.³ His Excellency, Mr. Yu Wenzhe had previously been appointed as the Republic of China's Ambassador in Ghana, Africa.⁴ The Chinese contingency is the new force in world affairs, working closely, in this instance with the Ghanaian government to carry out projects such as the Bui Dam.



Picture2: Professor David Dabydeen (on the right). Source: Google.

⁴ Editor, 'Chinese president urges more vigour for ties with Caribbean nations', *Embassy News*, 6 March 2013, at website

<http://gy.china-embassy.org/eng/xwfw/t1046731.htm/>.

⁵During this time, China facilitated the building of the hydroelectric dam, the Bui Hydro-electric Power Dam and also established a China-Africa cooperation fund of five billion US Dollars to assist the Chinese industrialists and business people to do business in Africa.

Painting of the shrimp girl: a bold statement about ordinary beauty

This book's cover picture depicts one of William Hogarth's paintings -*The Shrimp Girl*- an oil on canvas painting after 1740, (25 x 20 ¾ (63.5 x 52.7) reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the National Gallery, London, United Kingdom. See Bindman (1993)⁵; Craske (2000) and Paulson (2000). It has been said that William Hogarth's *The Shrimp Girl* was an attempt to show that beauty could be found in the commonest quarters. William Hogarth's genius in capturing the sociology of the age was noted by McWilliam (1993) and Dabydeen (1987).

This 221-page novel reads like only a novel is allowed to - in fantasy. Even if the reader were new to the subject of Afro-Caribbean studies and, I dare say, if Guyanese read this novel, it will bring many giggles, smiles, and laughs as the reader reminisces through the pages and phrases that the author has brought to us in printed form, the author having fluently flowed from English to Creole.

To introduce the author to the reader, it is very necessary to relate some of his achievements and background. David Dabydeen has been a Professor at Warwick University in England, United Kingdom, for 26 years. He has written

⁵ David Bindman said that 'Hogarth always had a strong pedagogical streak'. Hogarth believed that formal academies discouraged genius. He felt that real art should be about real life; and should concern itself with observation. Hogarth felt that the essential qualities of art could only be acquired by observation: variety, character and expression coming from nature: to be learned in a way that did not inhibit imagination. Bindman said that Hogarth felt strongly that beauty should not be depicted by 'the stony features of a Venus but a "blooming young girl of fifteen,"' an ideal embodiment of which was illustrated when he painted *The shrimp girl*. See also Burke (1955).

many academic history books and many novels too, books on literature, incorporating history, politics, law and culture. At present, he holds the esteemed title of ‘His Excellency, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary⁶ of Guyana’⁷ at the Embassy of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, in Beijing, China.

The novel, *Johnson's Dictionary*, is replete with excellent and experienced knowledge of art; literature; the history and the pain of slavery; and oftentimes, the subjugation of many female slaves to the plantation management and others –as is typical of numerous vulnerable persons; the hunger; the pain; and the misery of life as a slave in a foreign country.

Slavery in the Caribbean, Guyana, the Americas and Britain

The Holocaust of the Slave Trade has scarred generations before and no doubt generations to come. Black and brown descendants of slaves have been, at least, scarred with the reputation of being descendants of slaves and indentured labourers, but because many of their ancestors’ forced slavery.

⁷The cooperative Republic of Guyana is one of three small countries located in the northeast of the South American Continent. It has an area of 83,000 square miles (214, 969 square kilometres) which is about the same size as Great Britain (which has a population of 63 million people as compared to Guyana’s population of only 700,000 people, less than one million.

The 20,000,000 captured African slaves were NOT criminals

The African slaves were not criminals sent away to an outback colony as punishment by the courts as many working-class people experienced, when, on conviction for stealing a loaf of bread, for example, their punishment was often forcible imprisonment in Australia. The African slaves were simply and tragically, victims of capitalist greed. Their sorrows were inflicted onto them by the English, French, Spanish and Dutch middle classes who saw these people merely as potential numbers on their Balance Sheets.

The African slaves almost certainly received brutal injuries, from resisting being captured, to brute force head injuries by their 'slave owners' when they were unable through ill-health or trauma, to perform the productive hard-labour required for the growing and harvesting of crops on the 400 plantations with scant aid from proper tools and resources. Hundreds of thousands of the 20,000,000 slaves, the victims of the two hundred year Slave Trade. Indentured 'slaves' also must surely have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and none were not treated medically. Their ill-treatment today would be the cause of billion-dollar wars and class-actions for multi-billion pounds in compensatory damages. Nuclear wars would result, were this to be done to them today. The wealthy ship owners and plantation owners treated twenty million other human beings worse than they treated their farm animals. Were this to have occurred in present times to mere farm animals, the owners would have been prosecuted and imprisoned for many years after successful convictions. Even farm animals today have more legal rights than those 20,000,000 slaves in the 200 years they

slaved. All of this inhumanity by mankind to mankind was done in the name of financial profit and because of the greed of those who enslaved these forefathers instead of partnering with them.

Part One of Johnson's Dictionary

In Part One of *Johnson's Dictionary*, David Dabydeen created the fictitious character named Hogarth, a painter, who became a slave owner in Guiana. Hogarth painted pictures on commission for his living, but unfortunately, he descended into alcoholism. This fictional character bears no resemblance to William Hogarth, the English painter, engraver and writer and this is exactly what fiction allows- the poetic licence to create fiction and fantasy.



Picture 5: Self-portrait of the Englishman William Hogarth (*November 1697. to October 1764*), a self-taught and prolific painter, engraver, teacher and writer. Source: Google.

In the novel, the fictional Hogarth had taught his slave boy Cato the basics of preparing to create a painting. Cato, his slave boy, became proficient in working on the basics of Hogarth's paintings, leaving Hogarth simply to finish the paintings off because he had succumbed to *'the bottle'*.

'He turn (sic) into the dregs at the bottom of the bottle', Cato the 'slave boy' said, in part English, part Creole.⁸

At page 24, Cato is conjecturing that he hopes *'Massa (sic) Hogarth'* does not die from his alcoholism because, then, he, Cato, will probably be sold to a plantation owner and may have to *'mind⁹ pig, not pigment'*.

In sum, the fictional (Caucasian) Hogarth used an African man named Cato on a full-time basis as his servant, cleaner and unpaid personal technical assistant. This was the reviewer's opinion.

The diction and quality of English in *Johnson's Dictionary* by the author David Dabydeen is astounding and obviously written with flow and ease that is not surprising.

Cato, as he paints scenery of an English landscape, had to do so according to how he imagined that landscape to be, not having seen books or pictures nor

⁸ English is the official language of Guyana, the only English-speaking country in South America. The majority of Guyanese, however, speak Creole, which is a version of English known as Creole, Creole English or Guyanese.

⁹ The Creole word 'mind' here means 'to look after'.

had he ever been taken to England. He was preparing the basics of a painting and hoped to order to rouse his master from a sleepy deathbed. Cato muses to himself and says that ‘*beauty*¹⁰ *is not only the subject matter on the canvas – beauty is also technique*’.

Art is written about with the obvious love that Dabydeen holds for it, and indeed is qualified to, being the holder of a doctorate in the History of Art from an English University.

In contrast, William Hogarth, the English painter, had given lectures and seminars about art, expressing his opinion that artists in the eighteenth century should no longer copy the subject-matter of Greek art as they have always done. William Hogarth said that artists must move with the times and he called for fellow artists to paint modern material as is depicted by Britain’s industrial and commercial society. ‘The classical idea of true beauty is dependent on simplicity’, was the ideal of those times, whereas Hogarth argued that simplicity is not a primary quality.¹¹ Whilst the Hogarth seemed somewhat of a rebel, he was in fact, different and some would say that unfortunately, he was ‘a *genius* before his time.’ Contrary to Hogarth’s outspoken opinions, in those times, many artists continued to travel to Rome to study classical idealisms. Sometimes his outspoken opinions backfired, as when he completed a painting titled *Sigismunda*, but failed to find a buyer for it.

¹⁰ The real William Hogarth was not only a painter but also a writer and engraver. See Burke (1955). William Hogarth had the distinction of being the first artist in English history to produce images that suggest that ordinary working people have a virtue, a humanity

¹¹ Bindman, D. (1981) *Hogarth. 166 illustrations in colour*, London: Thames and Hudson, at pg 154.

Hogarth's work is much respected and as enjoyable today as it was in his heyday. He was self-taught, which appeals to millions who have no other choice than to be self taught. The masses must draw from his work. No Eton-educated stockbroker could produce etchings, engravings, very large paintings and writings with such profligacy. He worked very hard indeed. He *'carefully calibrated his work to respond to different tastes, exploiting a range of media and visual forms, from the vernacular languages of popular culture to the fashionable and refined diction of high art.....displayed a sure-footed sense of the deep divisions in national culture and was just as adept in exploiting the demotic tradition of the illustrated chapbook or street ballad as he was in making high-minded allusions to Renaissance masters or the classical tradition...it is Hogarth's great achievement to have worked not merely within his age, but across it, revealing its contradictions and exposing its shortcomings at the same time as he apparently revels in its sheer richness and inexhaustibility...'* and it paid off¹² (McWilliam, 1995).

His works inspired a culture *'whose ideals the artist expressed both in his personal demeanour and pictorial output'*.¹³ Hogarth's paintings spoke volumes, without him saying a word. *The Bench*¹⁴, for example.

At page 40, Dabydeen wrote: *'He cleared his throat and broke into prayer in that same alien tongue: "Ave Maria gratia plena Dominus tecum..."'*¹⁵

¹³ McWilliam, at page 5, paragraph 2.

¹⁴ *The Bench* was a painting by William Hogarth, completed in 1758 (oil on canvas, 17.4 x 18.1 cm). It depicts the Chief Justice, Sir John Willes (of known immorality; Henry Bathurst, later to become Lord Chancellor and two other men, generally thought to be William Noel and Sir Edward Clive.

¹⁵The full version being: *'Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, Benedicta tu in mulienibus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesus. Sancta Maria, Mater Dei, ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc et in*

At page 41, he wrote: *'...and when we reached the coast and sighted sea for the first time in our lives, a song escaped our mouths, like the Magnificat...'* It is of note that the *Magnificat* is, in the Christian church service, known as the 'Canticle of Mary' in the '*Liturgy of the Hours*' and is the joyous hymn of praise to Jesus, her son:

*'My soul magnifies the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
Because He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaid;
For behold, henceforth all generations shall call me blessed;
Because He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name;
And His mercy is from generation to generation
on those who fear Him.
He has shown might with His arm,
He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and has exalted the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich He has sent away empty.
He has given help to Israel, his servant, mindful of his mercy
Even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity forever'¹⁶*

At page 70, Dabydeen writes beautifully and pictorially:

hora mortis nostrae.' This is familiarly known as '*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death.*'

¹⁶ Luke's Gospel (1: 46-55).

'...She harrumphed when she saw me, turned away and went indoors.'

The word 'harrumphed' brings to mind immediately an indignant horse making that sound.

Part 2 of Johnson's Dictionary

Part Two gives a stunning example of accurate historical details woven within the narrative and especially of the profitability of the Slave Trade and slave ownership, and the slave owners' use of book-keeping analyses.

There were indeed unspeakable amounts of money profited from plantations in the Caribbean and Guyana, where slaves worked for almost no pay, except for the huts they lived in on the plantation and food they themselves grew on their owner's plantation.

Case law: Somersett v Stewart

Somersett v Stewart (1772)¹⁷ is a famous judgment which illustrates the greed of the making of people into slaves for only one purpose - profits.

This famous court decision of the Court of King's Bench Division in 1772 held that chattel slavery was unsupported by existing law in England and Wales even

¹⁷ 98 ER 499.

though it was applicable law in the British colonies and Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The judgment made by Lord Mansfield decided that the state of slavery was, at the time, incapable of being applicable in England and Wales and that slavery was so ‘odious’, that it could not be supported except by statute. The slave must be discharged. Lord Mansfield limited his judgement to the issue of whether a person, whether a slave or other, could be removed from England against his will, and that property rights in chattel slaves were unsupported by English Lord common law.

The facts of this case were that James Somersett, an enslaved African, was purchased by Charles Stewart or Steuart, a Customs officer whilst Stewart was abroad in Boston, Massachusetts, which state was at that time, a British crown colony in North America. Stewart returned to England in 1769 and Sommersett accompanied him, but in 1771 escaped, and was recaptured and imprisoned on a ship bound for Jamaica. Stewart had arranged for Sommersett to be sold in Jamaica.

Three people claiming to be Somersett's godparents from his baptism as a Christian in England made an application before the Court of King's Bench for a writ of *habeas corpus*. The ship's captain was ordered to produce Somersett before the Court of King's Bench, which would determine whether his imprisonment was legal.¹⁸

¹⁸ Under the common law, since the English Magna Carta in the year 1215, each and every detained person has a right to know the charge against him or her. A person being detained can force his release by demanding to be informed of the charges being made against him and if this information is absent, he or she must be released immediately. The process to obtain this release is known as obtaining a writ of *habeas corpus*. See Farbey, J. and Sharpe, R.J. (2011) *The law of habeas corpus* (3rd ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press; pgs.173 and 238.

British Government compensation for ending slavery: £20 million to 'British slave owners'

Plantation owners received compensation of £20,000,000 from the British government for loss of their 'slaves'. *£1.8 billion is the equivalent amount today of a sum of £20 million in 1828.*¹⁹ The freed slaves, however, received no such handsome and lavish compensations for the beatings they endured; the rape of their womenfolk; the lack of nutrition over the years, the shortening their lives; the estrangement from their families in Africa from where they were wrenched.

Res ipsa loquitur

This amount of £20 million in compensation to slave owners was not to be compared with the nil compensation to slaves. This discrepancy resonates the government's lack of foresight to creating liberty and is a reflection of the true nature of the slavery and hard labour suffered by the twenty million captured Africans. *Res ipsa loquitur* -the thing speaks for itself.

Slave labourers to English plantation owners

With regard to captured and purchased Africans transported to the sugar plantations of British Guiana, they were made to become slave labourers. Slave labour produced sugar and vast profits. Under the British rule in Guiana, sugar cane planting later expanded to richer coastal lands, with greater coastline

¹⁹ See the Inflation and Price Conversion tables Online at <http://safalra.com/other/historical-uk-inflation-price-conversion/>, accessed on Thursday, 28 November, 2013.

protection. Until the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, in 1827, sugar plantation owners depended almost exclusively on slave labour to produce sugar.

The English Abolition of Slave Trade Act 1827

The British Abolition of Slave Trade Act in 1827 made it an offence for any slave to be found on board a British ship. The ship's owner faced fines of 100 pounds for every slave found on such a ship. During the time when the English criminal offence was in force, it is said that slave ships' captains, in fear of being caught with slaves on board, often threw slaves into the sea so as to reduce/avoid the fines.

The English Slavery Abolition Act 1833

In 1827, the British government declared a new criminal offence of 'participation in the slave trade' as being an offence of piracy, punishable by death. Britain later passed the Slavery Abolition Act 1833 on 23 August 1833. This Slavery Abolition statute outlawed slavery in all British colonies and on 1 August 1834, all slaves in the British Empire were emancipated, but still indentured to their former owners in an apprenticeship system which was finally abolished in 1838.

The Spanish Abolition of Slavery Act 1542

As regards civilised and moral behaviour as depicted in their laws, Spain is to be praised. On 20 November, 1542, the Spanish government created some new laws, the *Leyes Nuevas*. They were issued by King Charles of Spain. The Spanish had taken parts of the Americas (colonisation) and had passed the *Leyes Nuevas* (translated as ‘New Laws’) ‘for the good treatment and preservation of the Indians and to prevent the exploitation of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas by the *Encomenderos* (large enterprise landowners) by strictly limiting their power and jurisdiction.

However, this caused large-scale revolt by the *Encomenderos* (large enterprise landowners). The New Laws consisted of many regulations on the *encomienda* system, including its solemn prohibition of the enslavement of the Indians and provisions for the gradual abolition of the *encomienda* system.

The New Laws stated that the natives would be considered free persons, and the *encomenderos* could no longer demand labour from the Indians in the Americas.

The English Law of the Sea Act 1539

The English Law of the Sea Act 1539 stated that:

The insurer takes upon him the risk of the loss, capture, and death of slaves, or any other unavoidable accident to them: but natural death

is understood to be excepted: by natural death is meant, not only when it happens by disease or sickness, but also when the captive destroys himself through despair, which often happens: but when slaves are killed, or thrown into the sea in order to quell an insurrection on their part, then the insurers must answer.'

Horror

Dabydeen, an established writer,²⁰ with polish and skill, takes one back to the horrors of slavery in British Guiana's sugar plantation then makes one travel to the streets of London's Eighteenth Century and the horrors of Bedlam (known to be Europe's First hospital to specialise in mental illness). Bedlam was founded in 1247, during the reign of Henry III, as the Priory of the New Order of St Mary of Bethlem in the city of London.

Dabydeen's skill and poise as illustrated with his own pen, eases the reader into the slave's Creole or broken English, and as quickly dances over to beautiful English diction and poetry, interspersed with Latin quotations (for example: '*Noli me tangere*') and a level of knowledge of art that is grounded in the best of England's academic institutions, playing with our minds and mixing up our sense of history as if in a dream where anything goes.

²⁰ Books by Professor David Dabydeen also include non-fiction books-(1) *Hogarth's blacks: images of Blacks in Eighteenth Century English Art*, Denmark: Dangaroo Press, 1985; (2) *The Black presence in English Literature*, London: Hermann Educational. 1985; (3) *Caribbean Literature: a teacher's handbook*, London: Heinemann, 1985; (4) *A reader's guide to West Indian and Black British Literature*, Warwick: Warwick University, 1987; (5) *Handbook for teaching Caribbean Literature*, London: Heinemann, 1988; (6) *Black writers in Britain*, London: Heinemann; (7) *Across the dark waters*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996; (8) *Oxford companion to Black British History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

In the epilogue of *Johnson's Dictionary*, an old woman relates the bleeding, physical pain and sorrow and anguish of the birth of her son, whom she bathed, hugged, and tried to suckle until she realised that he was stillborn, with naivety and no support; when she did, her family they rejected her stillborn and 'chased her away', after which time she eventually buried her dead baby in a small wooden box she had been given by a kind older man, with whom she lived and raised a family until his death.

England's peoples centuries ago also had their fair share of poverty and misery too, escape from which came only through luck, wit or cunning.

The fictional Hogarth's servant at one stage discusses with his friend how he might create a dictionary for the illiterate slaves to learn to read, a parody on *Johnson's Dictionary*, which was published on 15 April 1755 and written by Samuel Johnson. The 1755 *Johnson's Dictionary* remains among the most influential dictionaries in the history of the English language.

Conclusion

A good novel such as this *Johnson's Dictionary* is the product of good research. Research planning and design is a complex process and both plan and design have been made by this author. The result is a brilliant book dancing from Creole to the Queen's English, with the threads of a good story, pure fantasy coupled with dashes of 18th Century history, literature and the sociology of the slave trade, prostitution, poverty, wealth, greed and human diaspora.²¹ We also

²¹ See Segal (1995).

know that many good people fought hard to abolish slavery and the table below shows the start and alleged end of slavery:

The Slave Trade

Year	Country	<i>Law/situation</i>
1562	From England	Expedition by Sir John Hawkins.
1619	Virginia, United States	African slaves landed.
1625	Barbados	English arrived to settle
1626	St Kitts	English brought African slaves by ship.
1631	Guinea, Africa	Charles 1 granted monopoly to group of English merchants to trade in slaves.
1672	North America	English charter company granted monopoly to transport Africans as slaves to Americas.
1773	England	Court case- <i>The Somerset case: decision was that no slave could be forcibly removed from Britain.</i>
1778	Scotland	Slavery declared illegal in Scotland.
1781	At sea	Captain of slave ship Zong threw into the sea, 133 Africans captured into slavery.
1783	England	Quakers established the

		Committee on the Slave Trade.
1787	England	Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed by Quakers.
1791	St Dominique	Slave revolt.
1792	England, House of Lords	Resolved to gradually abolish slave trade.
1805	English Abolition Bill	Successful 1 st and 2 nd readings, then rejected in the House of Lords.
1807	England, Parliament	Royal Assent to the Slave Trade Abolition Act.
1776-1827	England	Over one million slaves were brought to work in Britain, many of them children.

This novel is so vividly written, so exquisitely prosed, that it would make a great film that would educate people today of the serious matters that interplay here, and notwithstanding that these matters have been well examined in academia during the past two or three decades, racism has once again raised its ugly head in more subtle forms.

'Slavery is a recurring subject in the works of Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'aguiar, yet their return to the past arises from an urgent need to understand the racial anxieties of twentieth and twenty-first century Britain'.

(Ward, 2011).

Indeed so, and yet, the United Kingdom government is at present working on a new and modern Bill against Slavery. There is slavery today; it may not take the form of sugar plantation slaves however, but as factory sweat shops; slaves in personal households; slaves held for prostitution, etc. So it is right that we hark back to the past because *people's memories are short*²², as Ward notes:

'Whilst racism may have had a long history in Britain, it only became the 'official', legitimized narrative through the passing of the 1981 UK Nationality Act which enforced Enoch Powell's ideas and arguably led to a form of legalised racism as national identity...Phillips, Dabydeen and D' Aguiar can be seen as exploring what is missing from both standard accounts of British history and historical accounts of slavery...'.²³

On 24 November 2013, the Right Honorable Theresa May said of slavery:

'It is all around us, hidden in plain sight. It is walking our streets, supplying shops and supermarkets, working in fields, factories or nail

²² Indeed, as UK police have now discovered that slavery in the UK is alive, many have forgotten that in the eighteenth century, black slaves began to be brought into London and Edinburgh as personal servants.

²³ Ward A. (2011) *Caryl Phillips, David Dabydeen and Fred D'Aguiar*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, at pg 7.

*bars, trapped in brothels, or cowering behind the curtains in an ordinary street.*²⁴

The situation of slave labour reflects the finding of the National Institute of Justice in the United States as per reports such as US.Dept. of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report*, Washington, D.C. (2012) at <http://www.state.gov/j.tip/rls/tiprpt/2012>. US researchers have already established that human trafficking occurs on a large scale within the US borders.²⁵

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²⁴ Teresa May, 'Slaves may work in your nail bar too', *The Telegraph*, 24 November 2013. See also, Editor, 'Slavery trade is tip of the iceberg', *The Telegraph*, 23 November 2013. See website www.telegraph.co.uk/news/crime/1046922/. See website www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/10470717/, (both accessed on 27 November 2013). See also, HM Govt 'Second Report of the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Human Trafficking', Cm 8731, London: TSO, October 2013 at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/251487/9794-TSO+HMG_Human_Trafficking.pdf/ accessed on 27 November 2013.

²⁵ Maureen McGough, 'Ending modern-day slavery: using research to inform US anti-human trafficking efforts', *National Institute of Justice*, Issue No. 271, February 2013, pgs 26-32.

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