

King Leopold II Donation – Briefing

This summary report was researched and written in response to the finding of a Newcastle University PGR student of a record of a donation made by King Leopold II of Belgium to the fund-raising campaign of the 1890s to build Armstrong College (at the time part of the University of Durham, now the Armstrong Building, Newcastle University). It supports this original finding with additional archival research and puts some further context of King Leopold's donation activities to UK institutions around it.

The donation recorded in the Durham College of Science Minute Book for the House Committee in Volume 2 (1888-1894) records that on the 26th September 1889:

Donation of £500 from the King of the Belgians. The Principal was requested to write Mr George Reid thanking him for the trouble he had taken in this matter and also to draw up a formal letter of thanks to HM The King of the Belgians to be sealed at the next meeting of Council.

Letters of thanks were then signed, sealed and issued in October of 1889. Further details on King Leopold's specific motivations in making the donation of £500 have not been uncovered and were unrecorded in any of the archival material consulted for this work but the context can give us clues to explain his possible reasoning.¹

The University's contemporary governing bodies and leadership sought to further strengthen and maintain the relationship with King Leopold II, as highlighted by the evidence held within Special Collections. In October 1892, Principal Garnett sent a letter to Mr George Reid, the Belgian Consul, asking for an invitation to be sent to the King of the Belgians to open the new buildings on their completion. The Earl of Durham had already laid the foundation stone of the new buildings.

This desire to maintain and strengthen ties with King Leopold II continued and in February 1893 the House Committee at Durham College of Science again approached him for a visit. This invitation was declined. The wording of the note taken is as follows:

Proposed visit of the King of the Belgians – a letter from the Belgian Ambassador was read, enclosing a copy of one he had received from Belgium to the effect that it would give the King much pleasure to be present at the opening of the new Departments of the College, but that he could not in January state what his engagements would be in October and was therefore unable to give a definite answer now. The matter was left in the hands of the Principal.

1894 brought about the opening ceremony where King Leopold II was again approached and 'it was reported that letters had been received stating that the King of the Belgians much regretted his inability to attend this ceremony.'

¹ It is notoriously difficult to translate values but using The National Archives' invaluable currency converter tool, £500 in c 1890 would be worth approximately £40,000 in 2017 values.
<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/>

There was a gap of seven years before any further mention of King Leopold II, but in September 1901 he reappeared. He had been approached about attending the University's Convocation, but he again declined to attend this.

The research carried out has been extensive, going far beyond the collections held by the University's Special Collections. In order to ascertain if there were further links – personal, financial or other – between King Leopold II and leading businesses and families in the region, the researcher contacted Tyne and Wear Archives and a range of other local private archives, but no links were found. Enquiries were also made with the Belgian National Archives and the Belgian Palace. It had been hoped these enquiries would provide greater clarity on the reasoning behind the donation but this has not been the case.

Further Questions:

Why did King Leopold II make this donation? One possible reason was that King Leopold II was investing in educational institutes where the expertise and research was aligned to his activities in the Congo. The College was planned as, and became, a key centre for coal and mineral mining research and a maritime hub, all of which were areas that had relevance for him and his colonial activities. This was also the case for the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine which also received a donation from King Leopold II and it is possible he was hoping for a return from his investments in terms of technological innovations and trained graduates.

The timing of the donation must also be acknowledged. Had it been before 1885 (the main violence exercised by King Leopold II and his activities occurred after this) or even 1876 (the date of the establishment of the International African Society), the possible link between the donation and the Congo would be more tenuous, but as it was made in the 1890s, there is a clear direct link.

Concluding Remarks:

The donation by King Leopold II has a lasting legacy in the physical form of the Armstrong building, which is still central to the city centre campus today. The donation was very much made within the culture of Victorian benevolence which was not limited to Newcastle but part of elite philanthropic culture across Britain at the time. Donations from foreign royal families were, however, uncommon and to date only the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine has uncovered a similar donation.² The reasoning behind this donation is not clear, despite extensive enquiries. With this in mind, while we can speculate that the donation was motivated by a desire to support research into minerals, naval architecture and medicine (all of which were of significant relevance and potential benefit to imperial interests) we cannot say this conclusively. This must be acknowledged when discussing the research and its findings.

² For example University of Liverpool:
<https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1114&context=younghistorians>.

Future Research

Going forward with these initial findings, it is crucial the university acknowledges the donation in a visible manner and also acknowledges the role that the then governing bodies and leadership played, in a contextualised manner.

This scoping project has opened up a number of possibilities around future and extended research which could underpin a much greater understanding of the institution's history, which could be acknowledged and presented to a wider public as part of an open engagement with the issues surrounding the colonial past.

Options might include (as examples):

- A substantive research project to further the research, interpretation and reparative elements of this history;
- A joint staff-student project, funded by the University's Black History Month Steering Group, to co-produce responses to these findings both in the short and long term;
- PhD or post-doctoral-level research projects, including collaborative approaches, to support further research and feed into the institution's next steps.

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