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Media Release

The United States After Slavery – Queen’s University historian leads US conference

Nearly a century and a half after the emancipation of around four million slaves in the American Civil War, a Queen’s University Belfast historian is bringing together some of the world’s leading scholars to explore the aftermath of slavery in the United States.

Dr Brian Kelly from Queen’s School of History and Anthropology leads the *After Slavery* project, an international research initiative between historians from the UK, Ireland and the USA. The project will welcome some of the world’s leading historians to a major conference at the College of Charleston, in South Carolina, next week (11-13 March 2010) to discuss race, labour relations and citizenship in post-emancipation America.

The conference keynote will be delivered by Professor Steven Hahn, whose 2003 study, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Harvard University Press), won the Pulitzer Prize in History, the Bancroft Prize in American History, and the Merle Curti Prize in Social History from the Organization of American Historians. Hahn will be joined by more than 100 scholars, journalists, and educators from 28 US states, and from Ireland and the UK, offering an exceptional opportunity for engagement between professional historians, American high school educators, and the wider interested public.

Dr Kelly said: “There are few chapters in the American experience that speak to us more powerfully than the crucial years during which four million former slaves tried to make something out of freedom. Yet for over a century after Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, most historians regarded slavery as an incidental aspect of the American past.

“Some argued that slavery had been an appropriate, even a humane means for organising a society comprising two inherently unequal races. Most claimed that the end of slavery came about without any initiative on the part of the slaves themselves. On the whole, much of the early scholarship on the aftermath of slavery was infused with racial assumptions no longer acceptable in the mainstream.

“One hundred years ago the African American scholar WEB Du Bois challenged this view, and since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, a new generation of historians influenced by the black freedom movement and by Du Bois’ pioneering work have countered this version of the past.

“This ‘revisionist’ view will be the focus of our conference. For the last generation, it has reshaped our understanding of the late nineteenth century United States. The sharp confrontation between ex-slaves and their former masters over what freedom would mean was the source of the bitter conflict that emerged in the post-emancipation South. This conference will explore in depth the profound impact of this conflict, both on the tragic history of the South, and on the development of American society in the years since.”

The *After Slavery* project is directed from Queen's University Belfast and funded by the (UK) Arts and Humanities Research Council. For more information visit www.afterslavery.com

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For media inquiries please contact Anne-Marie Watson at Queen's University's Press and PR Unit on 0044 (0)28 9097 5320, 0044 (0)7814415451 or a.watson@qub.ac.uk

Notes to editors:

1. Dr Brian Kelly is available for interview on Friday 5 March. Following this, he will travel to Charleston and will be available intermittently via e-mail (b.kelly@qub.ac.uk) or for telephone interviews.

2. The *After Slavery Project* is an international research collaboration directed from Queen's University Belfast, funded by the (UK) Arts and Humanities Research Council and benefiting from institutional support from the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina and the WEB Du Bois Institute at Harvard University. Launched in 2006 by three historians working in the fields of labour, southern and African American history, the project seeks to draw together some of the most exciting developments in the study of the post-emancipation US South, and in particular to encourage and promote a gathering consensus among historians that this period can best be understood as an important chapter in American labour history.

3. **Dr Brian Kelly:** With a background in US labour, Southern and African American history, Brian is at work on a monograph on *Black Workers and Political Mobilization in Reconstruction South Carolina*. His first book, *Race, Class and Power in the Alabama Coalfields, 1908-1921 (Illinois, 2001)* won five major awards, including the Frances Butler Simkins Prize for an outstanding first book by an author in Southern history, and he has published widely on race and labour in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His recent publications include *Labor and Place: The Contours of Freedpeople's Mobilization in Reconstruction South Carolina, Journal of Peasant Studies* 35:4 (October 2008): 653-687, and *Emancipations and Reversals: Labor, Race, and the Boundaries of American Freedom in the Age of Capital, International Labor and Working-Class History* 75:1 (Spring 2009): 1-15.