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Off the Pedestal: The Fall of Edward Colston

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On 7 June during a Black Lives Matter protest in the centre of Bristol activists pulled down the statue of slave trader Edward Colston which had stood on that spot since 1895. The protesters cheered, as many climbed the plinth, one woman giving the Black Power salute from where the statue once looked over inner-city Bristol. One protester knelt on its neck for eight minutes, symbolically replicating the police action which had killed an African-American man, George Floyd, on 25 May. His killing ignited the Black Lives Matter protests around the world.¹

The plaque on the side of the statue's plinth had originally said only this about the statue and Edward Colston: 'Erected by: citizens of Bristol as a memorial to one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city, AD 1895.' During the protest this was edited to read instead that the citizens of Bristol rejected Edward Colston. The protesters then rolled the heavy statue around the waterfront and dumped it into Bristol Harbour by Pero's Bridge which was commemoratively named after an enslaved man living in Bristol in the eighteenth century. This historic event marked the first time a monument to a slave trader was pulled down or otherwise removed in Britain. But it did not come out of nowhere.

There has been a long history of challenge to this statue as well as numerous other streets, pubs, schools, institutions, stained glass windows in Bristol Cathedral, religious ceremonies long acted out around Colston's birthday – Colston Day – on 13 November and a Colston Bun – a type of fruit-cake given to children on the day, all designed to celebrate him in Bristol. Protests have been particularly pronounced since the 1980s following riots and resistance across a number of British cities against racism, police brutality and institutionally racist practices. Activities in the 1990s surrounding slavery and memory in Britain were partly prompted by the riots of the 1980s. They focused on projects aimed at facing up to the past as a way of encouraging racial healing in Britain's fractured multicultural cities. Thus many people have been actively critical of the statue of Colston for at least the last thirty years. The grassroots campaigning group 'Countering Colston' have sought to challenge celebrations of Colston across the city through protest, campaigns on their website and through public history work including walking tours of the city. Countering Colston have consistently challenged the broader 'cult of Colston' in the city.²

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So, who was Edward Colston and why has the city of Bristol celebrated him so much? Born in Bristol in 1636, Edward Colston joined the Royal African Company in 1680. At the time it held a monopoly over the British slave trade and was responsible for the enslavement of over 84,000 African people who were taken to the Americas by British ships. Nineteen thousand of these people died on the Middle Passage. Even after withdrawing from the Royal African Company in 1692, Colston continued to slave trade privately, before retiring in 1708. He was also a Tory Member of Parliament for Bristol and a prominent member of The Society of Merchant Venturers, which had been formed in the thirteenth century. This was and remains an unelected group of Bristol elites which continues to exert power in Bristol today and is deeply embedded within colonial and imperial history. It funded the fifteenth-century voyage of John Cabot to Canada and traded in enslaved African people from 1689, lobbying the British Parliament to open this up beyond the monopoly of the Royal African Company.

Colston was also a philanthropist. He made some charitable donations for local causes, especially the establishment of boys and girls schools. The various schools that were dedicated to educating boys also served as a useful place to drum up sailors for his ships. More bequests followed his death in 1721, though a lot of the claims to his great philanthropy do seem to be exaggerated and poorly supported. The Society of Merchant Venturers have been influential in promoting the celebration of Edward Colston in the city as one of their greatest members, most of whom have been white males.

So why has the city of Bristol celebrated him so much? This really is the key question when it comes to historically contextualising the statue and the public memory of Edward Colston in Bristol. Why was so much named after him? Why were weird rituals and ceremonies instigated and why have they been carried out for so long? And why was a statue of him erected in 1895, some 125 years after his death?

In many ways, the cult of Colston, which gathered pace in the late nineteenth century, wasn't all that much about Edward Colston the person at all. As Bristol historian Madge Dresser has shown, the statue was part of a late Victorian memory cult.³ It was intent on foregrounding good Christian moral values through the celebration of a civic hero to buttress civic pride and boost provincial Bristol's identity and sense of self in an age that invented tradition.⁴ Civic authorities in Bristol chose a figure who they framed as a good Christian philanthropist, a wealthy merchant father of Bristol and a patriarchal and paternal figure head for Bristol citizens to look up to. This was particularly aimed at the urban poor of the city who between 1889 and 1890 led large-scale protests and strikes over living and working conditions in the city. As James Watts puts it, 'the erection of the Edward Colston statue can be seen as an attempt to reassert paternalism in the face of anxiety over working class unrest'.⁵

The narrative of Colston as a patriarchal philanthropic father of the city has been fed into school education and political discourse and inscribed on the fabric of the city. Streets were renamed after him. Twentieth-century concrete office-blocks which bore no historical links to Colston had his name emblazoned on their towers. The citizens of Bristol, black and white, were for over a hundred years taught that they should love this man, find pride in him as an emblem of their city and consider Colston a key part of the heritage of Bristol. However, challenges and protests to the statue are also part of this heritage. Activism and artistic interventions with the statue have long been a focal point for what Alan Rice has called 'guerrilla memorialisation', unofficial acts of engagement and interaction which challenged the public narratives of this statue.⁶ The statue has been graffitied and had alternative unofficial plaques added to it. It's been yarn-bombed with knitted chains.

To carry on this heritage, after the statue came down, a number of other figures have gone up in its place. There was a figure of a bald man in a rubbish bin with the words: 'Spoiler: St George Was Turkish'; a mannequin of British TV personality and now renowned paedophile Jimmy Saville with a placard criticising the BBC; and most recently a statue of Black Lives Matter protester Jen Reid, by London artist Marc Quinn, in the pose she took when the statue came down. Whilst powerful in its imagery of black female



The statue of Edward Colston being thrown in Bristol Floating Harbour, 7 June 2020

agency, this latest intervention, called ‘A Surge of Power’, has also been criticised for being the work of a white artist, from London, using this platform for himself.⁷ Many people hoped the work of local black artists could instead be supported. The sculpture was removed by Bristol City Council within twenty-four hours of it going up and, at the time of writing, is being held by the Museum Service.

There will no doubt be many more interventions. One suggestion has been to use the existing plinth as a place for revolving temporary artworks by local artists. Other suggestions have included statues of notable black figures such as Paul Stephenson who organised the Bristol Bus Boycott in 1963, in protest over Bristol Omnibus Company’s refusal to hire black or Asian people. Bristol-born street artist Banksy suggested that a new sculpture depicting the statue being pulled down should be put in the empty spot. Many people, including figures of government, have criticised the protesters for being vandals. Even if most people in Bristol generally agree that there probably shouldn’t be a statue celebrating a slave-trader in the middle of their city in the twenty-first century, a number certainly felt that the protesters should have gone through the ‘proper channels’ and this was the position laid out by most politicians, including Home Secretary Priti Patel who described the protesters as a ‘mob’.⁸ The proper channels, however, have repeatedly failed over the years.⁹

Groups have been calling for the statue’s removal tirelessly with no effect. In the last few years the city council has been working with a group of historians and local activists on an additional, alternative plaque to put on the statue’s plinth, next to the one that says nothing of where Colston got his wealth. There was great debate about the wording of this plaque. The Society of Merchant Venturers wanted to tone down the language and minimise information about the extent of Colston’s slave-trading activities. Others felt this would be an unacceptable sanitisation of the past. So even the addition of a contextual plaque failed due to power politics in the city.

As many historians such as David Olusoga and Olivette Otele have been at pains to stress, pulling these statues down does not erase history – it creates it.¹⁰ Historians can play a part in remembering both why these statues went up and why they came down. These statues are symbols in our public spaces. We should not forget how and why they were put up in the first place. We should tell these histories because of what they reveal about public sculpture, monuments and statues as part of the architecture of white supremacy.

racialised notions of a so-called ‘shared heritage’; that the buildings, statues, lavish country-houses and castles of a country like Britain are *our* heritage, that we should all feel a shared sense of ownership and inheritance for the nation-state through them. By telling their history, we show that statues are memory, not history. But they don’t even represent the past they’re supposed to be depicting. They reveal instead the attitudes, anxieties and contexts of the times in which they were created.

We should also not forget the circumstances in which these monuments are coming down in the present. As much as they represent the contexts of the times when they went up, they also embody the context of the present where they came down. These monuments were removed by the collective action of activists and protesters in the name of the Black Lives Matter campaign – in the name of confronting and calling out racial violence against black people and institutionalised racism around the world.

Too much of the public debate around what has been done and what should be done with the statues of white supremacists, slave-traders and imperialists has decentred the Black Lives Matter movement. Much of the media, especially the right-wing press, have instead engaged in an often abstract debate about what to do with all statues in general, often lamenting the loss of monuments no one has raised any issue with, or cares about, as the logical end of ‘erasing of history’. The danger is that debating what to do with statues can be used by some people to sideline the critical issues raised by the Black Lives Matter protests and divert attention away from calls for racial justice in the present.

Endnotes

1. This is an edited transcript of Jessica Moody’s talk ‘Vandalism or Vindication and What to do with the empty plinth?’ in the History Council of New South Wales’ panel session ‘History Now: Statue Wars’ on 20 July 2020.
2. See <https://counteringcolston.wordpress.com>.
3. See Madge Dresser, ‘Colston Revisited’, *History Workshop Online*, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/colston-revisited/>; *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port c1698-c1833*, Redcliffe Press, Bristol, 2007; ‘Obliteration, contextualisation or ‘guerrilla memorialisation’? Edward Colston’s statue reconsidered’ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/madge-dresser/obliteration-contextualisation-or-guerrilla-memorialisation-edward-colst> (Accessed August 2016).
4. E.J. Hobsbawm and T. O Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto Classics, 2012.
5. James Watts, ‘The history behind the Edward Colston statue pulled down by anti-racism protesters in Bristol’, *The Conversation*, 11 June 2020 <https://scroll.in/article/964230/the-history-behind-the-edward-colston-statue-pulled-down-by-anti-racism-protesters-in-bristol> (Accessed 12 June 2020).
6. Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2010.
7. Lanre Bakare, ‘Allyship or stunt? Marc Quinn’s BLM statue divides art world’, *The Guardian*, 15 July 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/15/allyship-or-stunt-marc-quinns-blm-statue-divides-art-world>.
8. Vincent Wood, ‘Cecil Rhodes: How Black Lives Matter and Bristolian vandalism renewed hope that Oxford’s imperialist benefactor could fall’, *The Independent*, 10 June 2020.
9. Tristan Cork, ‘How the city failed to remove Edward Colston’s statue for years’, *Bristol Post*, 10 June 2020 <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/how-city-failed-remove-edward-4211771>.
10. David Olusoga, ‘The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue is not an attack on history. It is history’, *The Guardian*, 8 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest>; Olivette Otele, ‘These anti-racism protests show it’s time for Britain to grapple with its difficult history’, *The Guardian*, 9 June 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/09/protests-british-history>.
11. Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, Routledge, London, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203602263>