

## **Should history be rewritten in line with modern day views of human rights?**

In recent years, numerous campaigns have arisen across the UK challenging the public commemoration of certain historical figures given their questionable human rights records. From Oxford's #RhodesMustFall campaign to Bristol's Countering Colston, activists have courted vociferous controversy. Though the campaigns have been demonised as sinister attempts to rewrite history, they would better be characterised as timely efforts to revise our understanding of the past.

Rewriting history, in the sense of distorting the historical record to support an ulterior agenda, is a reprehensible practice. It is typically associated with tyrants and genocide deniers, who seek to expunge from the record the 'incompatible'. By contrast, historical revisionism seeks to improve our understanding of the past by responding to new evidence and adopting fresh perspectives, and as such has been described as the 'lifeblood of historical scholarship'.<sup>1</sup> Recognition of this crucial distinction has been worryingly absent in debates surrounding historical figures memorialised in British public spaces.

Debates around public space gained particular traction in the UK in 2015 when students at Oxford University, inspired by South African activists, called for the removal of a statue commemorating the notorious colonialist Cecil Rhodes. Whilst the cries of the #RhodesMustFall campaign fell on deaf ears amongst the university's administration, the attention they received in the national press helped spark a wider debate about who and what we publicly commemorate.

Those who favour the *status quo* argue that the controversial statues represent pieces of history and, in seeking to remove them from positions of prominence, campaigners are attempting to erase from history individuals whose values contravene their own. They contend the figures memorialised must be seen

---

<sup>1</sup> J. McPherson, 'President's Column: Revisionist Historians', *Perspectives on History* 41:6 (2003).

within their historical contexts and that to critique their records by the standards of modern day human rights is an exercise in anachronism.

This argument is not entirely unconvincing. A paper condemning James I's sanctioning of 'enhanced interrogation techniques' against 17th Century Catholics would read about as bizarrely as an investigation into Richard III's abuses of the rights of unaccompanied minors. Certainly neither would be of real academic merit. Human rights in the modern sense only began to develop in Renaissance Europe, and even then the idea hardly resembled the rights currently protected by international legislation.<sup>2</sup> Applying modern conceptions of human rights out of context can, therefore, be problematic. However, the focus of these campaigns is not on every historical figure ever to have transgressed the European Convention on Human Rights. The targets are the proponents of slavery, white supremacy and colonial exploitation, whose crimes continue to resonate today, yet whose true histories have been obscured behind sanitised narratives.

Part of this sanitisation comes from the on-going commemoration of these figures in public spaces. Public memorials necessarily imply reverence towards their subjects, so the continued presence of these figures on literal pedestals across the country lends support to the narrative that their crimes either never took place or were far outweighed by positive societal contributions. Calls to remove statues and rename institutions, therefore, come not from a desire to hide the existence of these individuals from future generations, but to memorialise victims ahead of perpetrators and help society come to terms with darker aspects of our history.

In actual fact, for the campaigners this debate isn't really about statues; it's about collective memory. The impassioned call of critics that these figures should be seen in their historical context would be a little more palatable if the wider public properly understood what that context was and how it continues to affect

---

<sup>2</sup> C. Tomuschat, *Human Rights: Between Idealism and Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 11-13.

society today. A 2014 YouGov poll found 59% of the UK's population were proud of the British Empire,<sup>3</sup> an enterprise built on the exploitation of foreign lands and the trade of human beings. This is surely attributable to the defensive and, at times, even self-congratulatory way we learn about and commemorate unsavoury episodes from Britain's past.

Take the example of slavery; if we learn about it at all it is not through the lens of the suffering of the millions sold into it, but through the moral triumphalism of abolition and emancipation. The few public monuments that address Britain's involvement almost always celebrate abolitionists, and white ones at that, rather than memorialising victims or condemning perpetrators. This pattern emerged in the wake of emancipation, which was used to support Britain's supposed moral superiority and so legitimise continued 'stewardship' over a still expanding empire.<sup>4</sup> Yet the focus on abolition instead of apology continues today. Just two years ago, plans for a monument in Hyde Park to Britain's enslaved were axed after a thirteen-year struggle to secure the necessary funds either through public or state generosity.<sup>5</sup>

The frustrating response of so many in this debate is to insincerely question where it will stop. All this thin-end-of-the-wedge argument serves to do is shut the conversation down. The campaigns have never sought to strike from the history books those who flouted modern values. Even in terms of public space, few are calling for an overnight transformation. The real desire is to start a meaningful dialogue about who and what we celebrate. After all, equally important in this debate to what should come down is what should go up.

In this respect, the situation is not hopeless. Ironically, the extent of the backlash has given campaigners an enviable media platform and, for better or worse, a

---

<sup>3</sup> YouGov, 'The British Empire is 'something to be proud of'', (26 July, 2014) < <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2014/07/26/britain-proud-its-empire> > accessed 3 December 2017.

<sup>4</sup> L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 359.

<sup>5</sup> D. Olusoga, 'Why has a memorial to slaves quietly been dropped?', *The Guardian* (London, 4 October 2015).

dialogue has now begun. Equally, extraordinarily overdue though it is, last year saw the unveiling of the UK's first named commemorative statue of a black woman, celebrating Crimean War nurse Mary Seacole.<sup>6</sup> This year plans were also approved for a statue in Parliament Square of leading suffragist Millicent Fawcett.<sup>7</sup> Far from rewriting history, their commemoration gives voice to less celebrated historical struggles, hopefully broadening public understanding of them. However, a piecemeal approach is not enough. Once the furore over the statues has died down, it is vital we continue to have these conversations. History need not be rewritten to suit modern values, but we must re-examine the past failings of our nation and come to recognise their enduring impact today.

**Word count: 1,000**

---

<sup>6</sup> BBC News, 'Mary Seacole statue unveiled in London' (30 June 2016) < <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-36663206> > accessed 3 December 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Fawcett Society, 'Green Light For Millicent Fawcett Statue In Parliament Square' (20 September 2017) < <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/news/green-light-for-millicent-fawcett-statue-in-parliament-square> > accessed 3 December 2017.