

“Should history be rewritten in line with modern-day views of human rights?”

The Wills Memorial Building is an icon of Bristol. The size and intricacy of the bath stone tower, the heraldic ornaments that adorn it and the familiar sound of the ‘Great George’ bell make it at once synonymous with the University and the city. Described as "*a tour de force in Gothic Revival, so convinced, so vast, and so competent that one cannot help feeling respect for it*",¹ it is doubtless everything Henry and George Wills would have wanted when they commissioned Sir George Oatley to design the building in honour of their father, Henry Overton Wills III, benefactor and first Chancellor of Bristol University. One could perhaps understand then, that if they were alive today, Henry and George might feel a little aggrieved with the petition to remove the Wills name from the building.

You need only walk five minutes down the road from the Wills Memorial Building to arrive at Colston Hall. Bristol is littered with gratitude to Edward Colston for the donations that he made to the city; three schools and six roads bear his name, a brass statue of Colston has a plaque which lauds him as ‘*one of the most virtuous and wise sons*’ of the city. Like Wills however, there are calls to distance Bristol from the Colston name.

The reality is that the legacy of both Wills and Colston was built on the profits of the slave trade. Revered in their day as heroic philanthropists it is, in 21st century Britain, axiomatic that the means by which they cultivated their fortunes is morally reprehensible and their roles in the slave trade a historical injustice. All around the world cities are facing the same dilemma as Bristol; what should be done about the buildings, statues and scholarships which honour people whose actions today would offend human rights?

¹ "*Wills Memorial Building*". *University of Bristol, Centre for Romantic Studies*.

That such a question is being asked is, for some, faintly ridiculous. The argument goes that we are innocent third parties who should feel no need to confront the actions of people we have never met or have never known. We ought to be unapologetic precisely because our own hands are clean. After all, we didn't ask Wills or Colston to donate money to Bristol, did we? Removing statues is whitewashing history, changing the name of a building is censorship and no historical figure has an unblemished past by today's modern standards. If we were to disgorge the world of all of the statues of people who were morally questionable we, quite simply, wouldn't have any statues left.

Such a response is, it is argued, unsatisfactory. There is not only a need for the question to be answered, but also for some action to be taken, because past injustices give rise to present day obligations.

Let's take, for example, Colston. His riches came from his role in the Royal African Company who had a monopoly on the slave trade from West Africa in the 17th Century. The Company transported approximately 85,000 slaves, 12,000 of whom were children, across the Atlantic. A quarter of them died in the crossings. All of them were branded. If Colston were alive today he would be tried in The Hague for his role as deputy governor of the Royal African Company and no number of philanthropic acts would mitigate against the punishment he would deservedly receive. Judged by modern day standards, Colston was complicit in the violation of the human rights of tens of thousands. Today Bristol and its residents are the direct beneficiaries of these historical injustices. Schools which Colston funded and still bear his name educate the city's students, Bristol Cathedral's biggest window

is devoted to Colston as thanks for his donations and without his input various churches would not exist today.

These benefits all provide a tangible link between the past and the present and are relevant to our own moral integrity. It is not possible to condemn Colston's role in the slave trade whilst continuing to prosper from the benefits that his money provides without feeling unease for those who suffered injustice at his hands. In turn, we acquire a present day moral obligation to confront the history of the people we have honoured with statues, buildings and scholarships.

Colston, like others, are so intrinsically linked with our history that they can never be completely erased and pulling down statues will not remove our links to the past. The focus ought to be ensuring that men like Colston are properly remembered for both the good and the bad that they were part of.

There cannot be a one size fits all solution to the problem because the historical and contextual factors vary wildly from place to place. Each city needs to have its own conversation as to how they discharge their present-day obligations in dealing with the past. In Liverpool, for example, the International Slavery Museum commemorates victims of the slave merchants who helped to build the city. In New Orleans Confederate monuments have been removed altogether.

Rewriting history will not discharge our obligations and suppression of the past is itself a further injustice. We can continue to be beneficiaries of men like Colston but we must make the historical injustices of the past of our civic identities and present a balanced assessment of

these people for future generations. In Bristol, Colston's statue could have a plaque explaining the impact of his role at the Royal African Company, the schools named after him should educate their students about the full details of his life and the window in Bristol Cathedral need not bear the message that others should 'go and do thou likewise'.

It is an important lesson to learn that people can be both heroes and villains. Confronting the darkness of our history is now a matter of obligation after centuries of misremembrance. Our own sense of morality and justice demand it from us.

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(988 words)