

Pulling down statues: the condemnation of memory

On the face of it, the toppling of the bronze statue of Edward Colston seems like a very contemporary act, said Alastair Sooke in *The Daily Telegraph* – part of today's world of Black Lives Matter and “cancel culture”, where offensive public figures are cancelled, or cast out. “The history of sculpture, though, reveals that there is time-honoured precedent for such cathartic rituals, stretching back to the ancient world.” When Roman emperors fell, their statues were pulled down; coins had likenesses rubbed off. There was even a phrase for it: *damnatio memoriae*, the condemnation of memory. Iconoclasts have long smashed images they don't like. In 1989, Soviet statues were pulled down all over the eastern bloc. The sculptor Anthony Caro once told me that making sculptures was as natural as dancing or making music. Well, then, “the same applies to the inverse impulse to tear them down”.

The problem for Britain, said Guy Kelly in the same paper, is that if you started pulling down “problematic” monuments, you might never stop. The historian Alice Procter, who runs “Uncomfortable Art Tours” around London's museums, took me on a walk around central London. On Whitehall, we came across Robert Clive, who established British control over much of India, and was so rapacious that even his contemporaries baulked. On the Mall, we saw Captain James Cook – not such a hero to indigenous Australians. In Parliament Square, Churchill's statue is daubed thuggishly but not inaccurately with the words “was a racist”. Nearby, there's Nelson atop his column. “Well, Nelson was really, *really* racist,” explains Procter: he wrote a letter promising to fight till his dying breath to preserve slavery. “Once you begin noticing how frequent these statues are”, said Kelly, and how “simplistically valiant” they look, it's hard to argue with Procter's belief that we should at least “look at them anew”.



Stalin's likeness is torn down during demonstrations in Hungary in 1956

someone gets angry. This oddly brings them to life.” Some people argue that we shouldn't replace such statues because it means forgetting our history. That's a good point; but how about remembering our history in another way: say, replacing Colston's statue with a “big, bold artwork” recreating the cargo deck of one of his slave ships?

It creates a practical dilemma, though, said the blog *Estonian World*. Once you've pulled down an embarrassing statue, what do you do with it? In the former Soviet Union, many statues were destroyed (though a huge sculpture of Lenin in Odessa was turned into a likeness of Darth Vader). Estonia, however, took a different approach: it moved many of its Communist-era monuments from their plinths in town centres to a dedicated sculpture park in Tallinn, and so created an interesting memorial to Soviet occupation. In Bristol's case, Banksy has come up with an ingenious solution, said Imogen Braddick in the *London Evening Standard* – a plan he reckons will satisfy “both those who miss the Colston statue and those who don't”. Colston should be put back on his plinth, Banksy suggested on Instagram, but the city should also commission life-sized bronzes of people pulling him down. Result: “Everyone happy. A famous day commemorated.”

Many of those are difficult cases, said Jonathan Jones in *The Guardian* – “much-loved national treasures” or monuments to them. But it's absurd to pretend that, say, Colston or Cecil Rhodes are “heritage heroes”, or that their statues in Bristol and Oxford are major works of art. “If it wasn't for the protests against it in recent years, the boring old figure of Colston would have been noticed by no one.” It was just “one of Britain's legion of strange, unmemorable” Victorian statues, typifying “the artistically unimaginative genre of statuary favoured in Britain in the age of empire”. We don't really notice these statues “until