

# **Destroying relics does not destroy cultural legacies**

**David Zigmond**

**© 2020**

Human history, like individual human lives, often reveals many stories we later find ugly or incomprehensible. What should we do with these puzzling or disturbing relics?



## **Destroying relics does not destroy cultural legacies**

The image of the murder of a prostrate and handcuffed black man, George Floyd, by police lingers, rightly, repulsive and shocking. The fact that this was perpetrated in plain sight and watched by the murderer's uniformed, white colleagues adds a kind of demonic insouciance: clearly, there is a culture that remains here that deserves our righteous rage. But how do we best also understand the history in order to counter it?

Tearing down the statue of a seventeenth century Bristol slave-trader may gesture and express some virtuous wrath, but will it help us understand this current horror, or indeed, any history? Surely, rather, the destruction of historic relics then deprives us of the important opportunity to ask, wonder and discover what these lives and times were about. For without these we cannot so well anchor and learn these lessons for ourselves; we will be reliant wholly on the politically correct and increasingly unchallenged later narratives. However virtuously intended, there are certain realities that then get lost, as is already happening.

Those realities are of social-historical context. For example, this slave-trader, Edward Colston, died aged 84 in 1721, so his (now) iniquitous practices were then, by most, regarded as legitimate and pioneering Colonial trade. Abolition of the slave-trade in England came nearly a century later. Much as we may object now, the fact is that only a tiny minority in the seventeenth century saw through their era's assumptions of racism, to our own kind of racial equality view. The fact that Colston otherwise devoted much of his life and wealth to the poor's schools, hospitals and alms houses indicates, in other respects, a good and kind man.

To add to the complexity, there are the accounts from the surviving white sailors responsible for their African human cargo: the long sea voyages were so dangerous that, often, more sailors died than slaves. These were then the hard, harsh and heedless norms: we have to do

much mental work to imagine such lives. Yet if we can understand such calumnies we may better examine and avoid our own.

Isn't that more likely by retaining our relics to remind and provoke our thought, rather than relying on simplistic, black-and-white (!) righteous histories? Well-written plaques and signage can, placed alongside our relics, help us understand those stories that can give us humility and wisdom – how *then* becomes *now*.

\*

All eras have their blind-spots and that, undoubtedly, includes our own. Later we look back on these as amusing follies or chilling inhumanities – yet few could see these at the time.

For example, if we take almost anyone who was not poor and proletarian from Victorian England, we will find that their wealth depended largely on the inhumane, often enslaved, labour of children, subject colonised nations and the vote-less, property-less poor. All these disenfranchised people toiled disease-provoking hours in our mines, mills, shipyards and factories. That was, then, largely accepted as our economy and our culture. Should we now demonstrate our moral superiority by ripping down statues of Brunel or Gladstone? Or, more emphatically, Queen Victoria – the Empress of India?

\*

Nor are we as rightly righteous as we often like to think. We now ingeniously export our iniquities to distant communities and environments: we procure our 'affordable' clothes from the medieval-poor in Bangladesh, the lithium and cadmium from endangered African child miners, and our iPhones from camp-confined intimidated Chinese workers. We stealthily dump our toxic waste in the most wretched countries. Almost all of us say we abhor such practices yet, in an important way, we 'forget' and then reinforce and collude

with such organised inhumanity by eagerly and happily shopping for its products at the lowest prices.

And our last century's environmental damage – the knowing destruction we have unleashed against all other life, as well as ourselves – far exceeds that of our entire previous history. We don't put up so many statues now, so what or who will we find, in future times, to vilify and to demonstrate our superior moral sense?

We are all, always, purblind parts of history. Yet the more we can bring ourselves to see of this, the more we can learn from it. If we angrily pull down Edward Colston's statue, we will lose a lot to discover nothing.

But if we retain and reframe the statue – surround it with a researched and fuller story – we may then develop and pass on some wisdom and understanding.

-----0-----

---

Interested? Many articles exploring similar themes are available on David Zigmond's Home Page (<http://www.marco-learningssystem.com/pages/david-zigmond/david-zigmond.html>).