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Making Public History: Statues and Memorials

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In working on this edition Keira Lindsay and Mariko Smith have asked ‘whether monuments should be deconstructed, reconstructed or destroyed.’¹ Clearly attention to statues and memorials has recently been explored in many countries. Certainly in Britain there has been much discontent as I shall explain, yet opposition to particular statues has seemed to ignore and overlook progressive memorials and historical measures – towards black and ethnic minority groups that have been widely developed and supported in the past.

Now but then ...

Bristol, a former slave port in the west of England, has been critically and historically discussed for decades. Madge Dresser’s work, for example, has critically analysed the properties of slave owners and discussed the hostility of local workers to black bus drivers.² Over twenty years ago Sally J. Morgan looked carefully at the Bristol opposition to Edward Colston, a former slave owner, a statue of whom has been displayed in the centre of Bristol for many years. As she explained, there was a significant history of attempts to remove the statue which was ‘traced to the city’s controlling mercantile class as represented by The Society of Merchant Venturers, established in the 16th century and still going strong, who have contrived to forget almost as much as they demand we remember.’³ Yet in recent months under the aegis of Black Lives Matter the statue was quickly destroyed as if this was almost a new position.⁴ Court action against the four people who took down and damaged the Colston statue in June 2020 has initially taken place and now due to be heard at the Bristol Crown Court in December 2021. The four men have previously pleaded ‘not guilty’ and are on unconditional bail.⁵

In just recent days in June 2021 the damaged Edward Colston statue was displayed in the M shed museum in Bristol, now open. Visitors are asked to fill in a survey explaining what they think should happen next. That is, the display is seen as the ‘start of the conversation, not a completed exhibition’. Comments will be considered. ‘We are Bristol History Commission’ was established by the local Labour mayor, Marvin Rees, who was re-elected in May 2021. Its role is to ‘build an improved shared understanding of the city’s story’. Several local historians are members including, positively, Dr Madge Dresser, noted in this article.⁶ Yet while the council acknowledges the former role of several historians this needs to be considered

appropriately. For example, on a recent BBC2 documentary, alongside the recent display of the statue, entitled *Statue Wars: One Summer in Bristol*, no attention was paid to the past historical anti-slavery issues over many decades.⁷

In addition to Bristol, other slavery memorials seemed to go untouched and unrecognised. In the City of London the statue of William Beckford remains almost unknown in the Guildhall. As Madge Dresser explained thirteen years ago: ‘The evidence linking William Beckford (1709–70) to slavery is widely available and overwhelming. Beckford, twice Lord Mayor, was the free-spending son of a wealthy sugar planter and owed much of his position to his ownership of some 3,000 Africans enslaved on his numerous Jamaican plantations.’⁸ He wrote and spoke in defence of political freedom to which his statue attests but not the sort of freedom that was the source of his wealth.⁹ Although this too has been discussed by historians it seems largely unknown by recent activists.

Former Nineteenth-Century Memorials in London and Edinburgh

In London’s Trafalgar Square a column was erected in 1843 to Horatio Nelson who died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. While the nature of statues throughout the square have been somewhat criticised in recent years,¹⁰ attention is rarely paid to the presence of a black sailor positively engaged in battle,¹¹ present on the column’s black plaque. This is even overlooked when radical demonstrations are held in the square!¹²

There exists a memorial in Old Calton burial ground in Edinburgh in Scotland to past military events. George Bissell’s work was unveiled in 1893 ostensibly in memory of five named Scottish-American soldiers who had fought in the American Civil War. However, on top is a statue of Abraham Lincoln and at the bottom a bronze life-sized figure of a slave promoting a more specific anti-slavery message.¹³



Former slave, looking upwards to Abraham Lincoln, Old Calton burial ground, Edinburgh, 1893 (Photograph Hilda Kean)

Re-reading Past Histories

There have also been alternatives to statues and commemorations occurring through local organisations but these have been completely overlooked in recent activities. In the financial City of London, a representation

exists in stark juxtaposition to that of William Beckford's. 'The Gilt of Cain', a site-specific work in Fen Court, is near the Lloyds building and was erected twelve years ago. This city garden is the site of a churchyard of the former St Gabriel's Fenchurch Street, now in the parish of St Edmund the King and St Mary Woolnoth. The latter church had strong connections to the abolition movement. John Newton, the former slave trader, and subsequently anti-slavery campaigner, was rector from 1780 to 1807.

'The Gilt of Cain' combines material of the Scottish sculptor Michael Visocchi with Lemn Sissay's poetry and was opened in 2008 by Desmond Tutu. Visually, the sculpture consists of variously sized cylindrical columns, resembling sugarcane – or possibly human figures.



Gilt of Cain by Michael Visocchi (with Lemn Sissay), City of London, 2008 (Photograph Hilda Kean)

As Visocchi explained, 'The idea was that I could somehow use these sugar cane shapes so that they could be read on the site as figures, as anthropomorphic forms – and therefore could they not then surround a pulpit as a congregation?'¹⁴ The work was initiated by Black British Heritage, chaired by Ken Martindale, who was involved in community politics for many years, including the Notting Hill Carnival.¹⁵

Near Lancaster, once the fourth largest slave port in England, a grave to Sambo (sic), a slave who died shortly after arriving in the 1730s, was subsequently commemorated in the early nineteenth century with a gravestone and an engraved plate in Sunderland Point.¹⁶ In the early twenty first century signposts were erected to the grave and visitation was encouraged. Teachers brought children who placed painted and decorated stones nearby. Other work in Lancaster included the erection of a memorial outside the former customs house in St George's Quay recalling 'Captured Africans'. It was sculpted by Kevin Dalton-Johnson using stone, steel and acrylic. Although funded by public money, the initiative was created by local people, encouraged by Alan Rice, an advisor to the Slave Trade Arts Memorial Project (STAMP). Much of his academic work included 'the politics of memory in the black Atlantic'. By simply living locally in the town he helped create further attention to the nearby history of the slave trade.¹⁷



'Captured Africans' by Kevin Dalton-Johnson, Lancaster, 2005 (Photograph Hilda Kean)

Such histories critical of former racism and positive public memorials in various formats are obviously not just part of the British experience. For example, in Australia, an article of 2006 discussed the location of the Dog on the Tucker Box in Gundagai, in New South Wales, while referring to the place of 'the most famous flood in Australian history' of 1852 where a local Aboriginal man, Yarri (and subsequently Jackey Jackey), rescued sixty nine white people from the massively swollen and dangerous waters of the Murrumbidgee River. In recent years a concrete bridge was named after him and a new monument was erected in North Gundagai cemetery¹⁸ since this had been 'in the memory of Gundagai people for generations'.¹⁹ A later monument to Yarri and Jackey Jackey – who both saved white people – was unveiled locally in June 2017 in central Gundagai.²⁰ Yet a recent article referring to Gundagai describes the dog as 'one of Australia's most successful purpose-built tourist attractions' but gave no attention to local re-readings of Aboriginal contributions to past events and more recent recognition of this.²¹

Public History and Local People

Local commemorations of groups of ethnic minority people have clearly developed in different ways. It has also been the case – despite coverage in, for example, *The Guardian*²² – that books, societies and campaigns



Yarri's monument , North Gundagai cemetery, erected 1990 (Photograph Hilda Kean)

have existed positively for many years. One of the most popular books – apparently widely ignored by many activists in recent events – is Peter Fryer's *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* published by Pluto Press in 1984 and only recently promoted on a particular British Library website.²³ However, specific attention paid in schools to anti-racist historical curriculum had been widely abolished beyond recognition such as that developed by the ILEA alongside radical teachers in ALTARF from 1978 into the 1980s. Their publication *Challenging Racism* explored the strategies implemented in a range of schools.²⁴

From the early 1990s academics particularly emphasised black history including Kushner and Lunn who edited *The Politics of Marginality*.²⁵ In 1991 the Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA), a public organization, was developed 'to foster research and to disseminate information on the history of Black peoples in Britain'.²⁶ Beyond the status quo of the government's proscriptions on black history, radical teachers, such as Martin Spafford, developed black history in schools, though this was not a common practice. BASA's lobbying of the government's curriculum position, including bringing teachers and school students to confront a DFE official, resulted in agreed new historical curriculum. Subsequently Spafford and others issued textbooks of *Migration, Empire and the Historic Environment* arising from changes agreed in the GCSE history curriculum from 2016 with the first exams in 2018.²⁷ Such progressive activity towards people's *own* interest in radical history and their own positions has been seen in many public history works. Public history books have often referred to local community groups in the making of history, for example District Six Museum in South Africa, the Golconda oral history in Trinidad and Maori developments in New Zealand.²⁸ Others also emphasised the projection of public historians towards people's projects and the actions and agency of people themselves.

Certainly those interested in public history have recently pursued activities commemorating, say, a drowned black South African from a nearby southeastern channel or analysing the commemoration of African and Caribbean troops, also from the First World War, in London.²⁹ But at a recent zoom conference called ‘Doing Public History in Lockdown and beyond’, public history was distinctly an area of higher education.³⁰ One contributor explained online; ‘We want to find new ways to engage as academics with contemporary struggles, to learn from activists, and to see how we can use what expertise and institutional resources we have to provide active solidarity.’³¹ Whether this suggests strengthening the role of academic historians and telling activists what to do seems somewhat ambiguous about acknowledging other people’s positions. Recently my article in *A Companion to Public History* emphasised the question: ‘Where is Public History seeing different approaches to a set definition?’ I referred positively Paul Martin’s view that ‘it empowers the individual in their sense of ownership and as a contribution to what history is and how it is made.’³² Perhaps thinking broadly and creatively about public history in the current climate still needs consideration.

Endnotes

1. See <https://www.uts.edu.au/research-and-teaching/our-research/australian-centre-public-history/events-and-seminars/history-week-2020/public-protest-and-public-history-statue-wars-ii-public-history-hour-archive> (Accessed 6 October 2020).
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5. *ibid.*
6. See https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/?utm_source=whatson&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=colston (accessed 11 June 2021).
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13. See ‘the only monument to the American Civil War outside the US. A statue of Abraham Lincoln standing over a freed slave’, *The Scotsman*, 15 February 2016 available at <https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/why-there-monument-abraham-lincoln-edinburgh-1482881> (Accessed 6 September 2020).
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15. Hilda Kean, ‘Where is Public History?’, in David Dean (ed), *A Companion to Public History*, Wiley Blackwell, Chichester, 2018, pp 38–40. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118508930.ch2>
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17. Rice, *op cit*, pp32–54.
18. Hilda Kean, ‘Public history and two Australian dogs: Islay and the dog on the tucker box,’ *ACH: The Journal of the History of Culture in Australia*, no24–25, 2006, pp150–1.

19. Wardiningsih Soerjohardjo, 'Remembering Yarrie: An Indigenous Australian and the 1852 Gundagai Flood', *Public History Review*, no 19, 2012, p128. <https://doi.org/10.5130/phrj.v19i0.3096>
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24. All London Teachers Against Racism & Feminism, *Challenging Racism*, ALTARF, 1984. It included materials particularly provided in London's Quintin Kynaston School.
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28. See, for example, Hilda Kean and Paul Martin (eds), *The Public History Reader*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2013; Dean, *op cit*; Paul Ashton and Alex Trapeznik (eds), *What is Public History Globally? Working with the Past in the Present*, Bloomsbury, London, 2019.
29. See the black South African flag now attached to Cpl Nagozo's gravestone in Hastings in 2016. <http://hildakean.com/?p=3397> (Accessed 26 August 2020); John Siblon, 'Negotiating Hierarchy and Memory: African and Caribbean Troops from Former British Colonies in London's Imperial Spaces', *The London Journal*, vol 41, no 3, 2016, pp299-312 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03058034.2016.1213548> and commemoration. <http://hildakean.com/?p=3378> (Accessed 10 June 2020).
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31. History Acts available at <https://www.history.ac.uk/seminars/history-acts> (Accessed 8 September 2020).
32. Kean in Dean, *op cit*, p35.