

George Floyd's Killing Revives a British Debate Over Its Imperial Past

1. The killing of George Floyd in police custody in the U.S. has **revived** a debate about how the U.K. should remember its lost empire.
2. Black Lives Matter demonstrators in the port city of Bristol on Sunday **toppled** a bronze statue of the 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston, which they then dumped in the city's harbour.
3. Over recent days other prominent memorials have been targeted by protesters. In London, a monument to Winston Churchill outside Parliament was **daubed** by protesters with graffiti describing the World War II leader as a racist. Among other targets: a statue in Oxford of Cecil Rhodes, the arch-imperialist whose bequest has sent thousands of Americans to study in Britain.
4. On Tuesday a statue of slave owner Robert Milligan, which stood in east London, was removed by local landowners following complaints.
5. Britain has come late to an official reassessment of its history. British discussions about slavery, for example, have traditionally focused more on the country's role in abolishing the slave trade than on its earlier phase as a leading **exponent**.
6. The country's colonial past isn't widely taught in schools but remains a keystone of its identity. Britain has largely refused to face up to the problems associated with its imperialist past because doing so would be traumatic, said Deana Heath, a historian who specializes in Indian and colonial history at the University of Liverpool. "Without empire there is no British identity."
7. There have been similar protests in some other places in Europe. In Belgium, statues to King Leopold II, who in the late 1800s personally owned the Congo and was responsible for the mutilation and death of millions there, have been defaced, burned and painted red. In cities in northern Belgium, most Leopold statues already come with explainers about his atrocities.
8. British cities are **replete** with reminders of the men who built a globe-spanning dominion starting from around the 16th century before it rapidly declined after World War II. Streets, monuments and even pubs have names harking back to this time.
9. Whether these mementos of Britain's pinnacle of international power should be **junked** or **played down** is sensitive. A poll by YouGov found that a third of people thought the statue of Colston should have been left alone, while 40% said it should have been taken down legally. Just 13% thought it right for protesters to tear it down.
10. Sadiq Khan, mayor of London, has set up a commission to review the diversity of statues in the capital and said he hopes it will lead to monuments to slave traders and plantation owners being removed.

11. "I have not got ownership over the statues or indeed some of the land some of these statues are on. But it's a wider conversation I want to have [about] the diversity of the public realm in our city," Mr. Khan said. "We should be commemorating great black Britons," Mr. Khan told the British Broadcasting Corp.
12. On Tuesday in Oxford, campaigners calling for the removal of a statue of Rhodes protested outside Oriel College where his statue resides. The leader of the Oxford City Council said she had sympathy with the campaign and wrote to the college inviting it to remove the statue. A previous petition to remove the statue in 2016 was rejected by Oriel College, which said the likeness represented the complexity of the legacies of colonialism.
13. Simphiwe Laura Stewart, a leader of the Rhodes Must Fall campaign, says the statue should be placed in a museum. "We want a democratic and open conversation about how we frame history and symbols in a way that is representative of our values right now," she said.
14. The University of Oxford didn't respond to a request for comment. The university is also home to a building dedicated to Rhodes. Rhodes scholars have included former U.S. President Bill Clinton, onetime presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg and journalist Ronan Farrow. The award allows graduate students from around the world the chance to study at Oxford.
15. In Edinburgh, calls have been mounting to remove the Melville Monument near the city center, which was erected in 1821 in memory of Henry Dundas. He is best known today for delaying the abolition of slavery while serving as Britain's Home Secretary, arguing that it should be eradicated gradually. The 150-foot column bearing his statue was sprayed with the words "George Floyd" and "BLM" during demonstrations on Sunday.
16. Edinburgh's city council agreed Tuesday to amend the statue's plaque to refer to his involvement in slavery.
17. The step was a victory for a two-year campaign led by retired professor Geoff Palmer.
18. Mr. Palmer said the action in Bristol was a lost opportunity to teach people history. "I don't believe in removing statues, or street names, or attacking buildings, because if you remove the evidence, you remove the deed, I'm just concerned that in 100 years someone will say 'Colston, who is he?'" he said.
19. Some of these historical figures have a complicated legacy. Dundas, known as the First Viscount Melville, first came to public attention in the 1770s for successfully defending a slave who escaped from an estate in northern Scotland after he was brought from Jamaica, establishing the principle that slavery wasn't recognized in Scotland.
20. Others, like Rhodes, were philanthropists. Colston, a former merchant and member of Parliament, endowed schools and hospitals.

21. Leading politicians are **treading a fine line** between protecting law and order while not endorsing Colston's legacy. On Monday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that he did "not support or indulge those who break the law, or attack the police, or **desecrate** public monuments."
22. The destruction of Colston's statue was "completely wrong," said Labour Party leader Keir Starmer. But he added "that statue should have been taken down a long, long time ago."
23. Removing all colonial-era relics would prove impossible, said Ms. Heath. For instance, a celebrated street in Liverpool is Penny Lane, made famous by a Beatles song, which she believes is named after an 18th-century slave trader, though some other local historians contest this. "Who is going to change that?" she said.

Matters arising:

1. What did you think of the article?
2. What do you think of the UK's colonial past?
3. What do you think British people think about it?
4. If you "dump" something what are you doing? (para.2)
5. Do you think the protestors were right? Why or why not?
6. Why do you think the UK has maybe "come late" to a reassessment of its history? (para.5)
7. "Without empire, there is no British identity." What do you think of this statement? (para. 6)
8. Why do you think maybe Britain's Imperial past is not taught in schools? Do you think this is the same for other countries who have had a complicated history?
9. How did Britain become "a globe-spanning dominion"?
10. If you "play something down" what are you doing? (para.9)
11. If you are having a "wider conversation", what are you doing? (para. 11)
12. What should countries like Britain do with its statues of people who did things that would not now be considered acceptable?
13. Mr Palmer, a retired professor said, "if you remove the evidence, you remove the deed." What do you think about this? (para. 18)
14. What figures should be celebrated here in Chile that are not currently recognised?

Final thoughts.

Vocabulary:

Revived

To topple

To daube

Exponent

Replete

Junked

To eradicate

To endow

Treading a fine line

To desecrate