

A Tale of Two Colstons: The Rise and Fall of A British Slave Trader's Legacy

Ritch Sibthorpe

***Abstract:** The toppling of a statue of slave-trader and Royal Africa Company (RAC) executive Edward Colston during the Black Lives Matter protests of June 2020 is, perhaps, the most high profile example of the conflict between contemporary British society's social conscience and historic civic monuments adorning public streets and buildings, dedicated to those whose fortunes are rooted in slavery. Colston played a key role in Britain's seventeenth-century slave-trade, rising to the role of deputy governor of the RAC in 1689, before endowing schools, churches, almshouses and hospitals across his birthplace of Bristol. Following his death in 1721, the nineteenth century saw an enthusiastic celebration of Colston's legacy with his name adorning music halls, schools and civic institutions culminating in the installation of a bronze sculpture in his image, made by John Cassidy in 1895, in the centre of Bristol.*

Yet in 2020 the world's media saw the statue toppled from its plinth by protestors driven by a deep rooted resentment that had grown within the local community for more than a century. Relocated to Bristol's M Shed gallery in 2021, Cassidy's sculpture of Colston now lies battered, beaten and adorned with graffiti, forever altering its meaning and creating an entirely new symbol of Britain's journey to reconcile its modern social identity with its slave-trading past. Through the lens of these two artefacts born of a single statue - the original, pristine sculpture of 1895 set proudly upon its plinth versus its twenty-first century cousin, torn from its base and tossed into the River Avon in 2020 - this essay will discuss why and how we celebrate the legacies of prominent individuals in our public spaces, the tensions between economic history and social progress, and the fundamental challenge of how Britain's concern with the West India interest should be represented in contemporary narratives.

Looking first at the scale of Britain's legacy of slavery, according to research by The National Archives team Britain transported some 3.1 million people into enslaved labour across its colonies between 1640 and 1807.¹ The most common destinations were the major sugar plantations owned by British families and individuals in the West Indies, where slavery was enabled by local laws classifying this newly imported workforce as property to be bought and sold, devoid of human status and associated rights. It would not be until 1788, almost 150 years after British slave-traders had begun transporting African people across the Atlantic Ocean, that the first significant piece of legislation relating to slavery would pass royal assent in Britain.

The Slave Trade Act of 1788 limited the number of enslaved people that could be transported in single maritime voyages, in order to reduce loss of life due to overcrowding. Nineteen years later, the 1807 Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade was introduced after much public, private and political debate opening up the road to freedom for the enslaved. In the period between these acts, sugar plantation owners continued with their endeavours, seeing a further 765,000 enslaved people transported by British ships to the West Indies in the 15-year runway to Abolition.² Finally, the Slavery Abolition Act passed royal assent in 1833 including a £20 million compensation package for slave-owners. Analysing these compensation payments, the University College London (UCL) *Legacies of British Slave-ownership* project created a new database comprising the details of 47,000 slave-owners who each received financial compensation from the Slave Compensation Commission, on enactment of the 1833 Abolition Act.³ The project proved revealing, providing a unique snapshot of the country's slave-owners on the eve of emancipation. Writing on behalf of the UCL project team, Nicholas Draper suggests that slave-ownership 'permeated every tier of the elites, not only the aristocracy and gentry but also the economically active sections' of society.⁴ It

¹ The National Archives <<https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/slavery/pdf/britain-and-the-trade.pdf>> [accessed 25 November 202].

² Martin Meredith, *The Fortunes of Africa* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), pp. 191–194.

³ *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership*, ed. by Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClellan, Katie Donington, and Rachel Lang (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p.2.

⁴ Hall, Draper, McClellan, Donington, and Lang, p. 37.



Figure 1. Statue of Edward Colston, bronze, 1895, in situ. Made in England by John Cassidy. Photographer unknown (image courtesy of wikimedia, under a creative commons license).

was not, after all, a phenomenon reserved for major plantation owners and slave-traders. Instead, the network of those receiving compensation after emancipation stretched far and wide across Britain. Of the 47,000 names featured in the original database, the most frequently listed occupation is ‘merchant’. Vaguer still are phrases such as ‘West Indies merchant’, ‘property owner’ and those connected to the ‘West India interest’, all common nomenclature for individuals, families and organisations generating wealth derived from slavery-based sugar production and indicative of the desire to elide such a connection. Edward Colston’s story, however, is one that permeated the very heart of the ‘West India interest’ and arguably places him at the peak of this slave-trading ecosystem.

Born in Bristol in 1636, Colston became an apprentice at the London Mercers' Company in 1654 before embarking on a successful mercantile career importing wine and other produce from Spain. In 1680, Colston joined the RAC, a joint-stock company established by royal charter in 1672 to capitalise on the growing African slave-trade,⁵ embarking on a thirty-year career with the company. After leaving the company Colston used the wealth he'd accumulated to invest in his beloved Bristol, funding two new almshouses, providing an endowment for the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital, helping renovate the Cathedral and establishing Colston's Boys' School. He was elected MP for Bristol in 1710 before retiring to Mortlake in Surrey where he died, aged 85, in 1721.⁶

In the nineteenth century, the Victorians joyously celebrated Colston's life with aplomb, focusing almost entirely on his philanthropy while his role as a slave-trader faded in to the background. Arguably the recent halo of emancipation remained fresh enough to be considered a neat and satisfactory ending to his ventures in slavery. 1867 saw Colston Hall open, a music venue named in his honour on the site of the old Colston's Boys School.⁷ And an 1869 article from *The Times* describes an event known as Colston's Day as an 'annual gathering of politicians and philanthropists convened to perpetuate the memory...and example of Colston'.⁸ The event reportedly included a speech from organisers concluding that Colston '...set a great and bright example, and stimulated the hearts of men to feel compassion for the poor'. While being 'a great man, but not without his faults', the President of the Society of Merchant Venturers accordingly declared it time to 'bury those faults in oblivion and hang another garland on his tomb'.⁹

⁵ The National Archives <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/africa_caribbean/docs/charter-royal_african.htm> [accessed 5 December 2021].

⁶ Kenneth Morgan, 'Colston, Edward (1636–1721), merchant, slave trader, and philanthropist.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (23 September 2004) [accessed 12 December 2021]. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-5996>

⁷ Colston Hall website archive<<https://web.archive.org/web/20110725185806/http://www.colstonhall.org/aboutthe-hall/history/history1>> [accessed 15 December 2021].

⁸ 'Colston's Day at Bristol.' *Times*, (15 November 1869), p. 4 in *The Times Digital Archive* <ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2083/apps/doc/CS67283311/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=898055b1> [accessed 15 December 2021].⁹

⁹ Bristol Post news archive <<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/how-bristol-challenged-colston-100-5496144>> [accessed 7 December 2021].

Arriving at a moment in time described by *The Bristol Post* as the high point of the ‘Cult of Colston’, in 1895 the statue of Colston was installed in the centre of Bristol to celebrate his legacy.¹⁰

Cast in bronze by Irish sculptor John Cassidy, set on a plinth of Portland stone, the 2.6 metre-tall statue featured a plaque bearing the words ‘Erected by the citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city AD 1895’.¹¹ By the end of the nineteenth century Colston’s legacy was being celebrated across Bristol with no visible discussion on his roots in the slave-trade. But that would change as the bicentenary of his death approached in the early part of the twentieth century.



Figure 2. Statue of Edward Colston, bronze, 1895. Made in England by John Cassidy. Image shows the statue being thrown in to the River Avon on 7th June 2020. Photographer unknown (image courtesy of wikimedia, under a creative commons license).

¹⁰ Historic England Archive <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

¹¹ Historic England Archive <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

Writing in 1920, Reverend Dr Henry John Wilkins researched and published a new biography detailing Colston's work at the RAC,¹² revealing the extent to which slavery lay at its core. In a subsequent letter to the Western Daily Press newspaper, Wilkins argued for an end to Colston Day celebrations:

I have urged, having regard to the unhistorical and ill-proportioned position Bristol has given to Edward Colston through the absence of documentary evidence and political partisanship with its charitable efforts, that Bristol should free herself from such a position, recall her heritage and rise to a true "Commemoration" on November 13th in each year of the noble galaxy of benefactors and worthies of 'The Metropolis of the West'.¹³

Wilkins' new biography provided a comprehensive account of Colston's life, including his role in the slave-trade, for the first time. The cyclical nature of annual Colston's Day celebrations meant the city's institutions had no choice but to engage in dialogue on the implications for Colston's status as Bristol's shining example. In 1936, the Western Daily Press declared that '...where a public man has a black mark on his public character, it (should be) hushed up and passed over in silence when he is being praised - not brought up and exposed'.¹⁴ A Colston Day sermon took place in 1937 at Bristol Cathedral and included the observation that 'if (Colston) did make much of his money by the slave-trade it was unfair to blame him for not being in advance of his time', suggesting that the moral imperative lie only in the legislation of the day.

After relatively quiet periods either side of war, the historians of the 1970s revisited the roots of Colston's fortune, including Derek Robinson. In an excerpt from the revised edition of his book *A*

¹² H.J. Wilkins, *Edward Colston, A Chronological Account of His Life and Work Together with an Account of the Colston Societies and Memorials in Bristol* (Bristol, 1920).

¹³ Wilkins, 6.

¹⁴ Derek Robinson, *A Darker History of Bristol* (Bristol: Countryside Books, 2005), pp.7, 78. (First published as *A Shocking History of Bristol*, London, 1973).

Shocking History of Bristol, Robinson argues that ‘the slave trade was a huge, roaring bandwagon and all the city fathers were on board: mayors, sheriffs, aldermen, councillors, Merchant Venturers, and last but not least Mr Edward Colston MP...which the boys and girls of Colston’s School might ponder as they kneel in prayer on Founder’s Day’.¹⁵ Over the next two decades a growing resentment would rise across Bristol’s artistic and cultural communities while Bristol City Council de layed plans to alter the presence of Colston’s legacy across the city in any way.¹⁶



Figure 3. Statue of Edward Colston, bronze, 1895. Made in England by John Cassidy. Graffiti added in 2020 following toppling of the statue in July 2020. Displayed at the M Shed Museum in June 2021. Photographer unknown (image courtesy of wikimedia, under a creative commons license).

To summarise, Colston’s history as a slave-trader was becoming more widely known at least a century before the toppling of the statue erected in his name, in the centre of Bristol during June 2020. In fact, taking place throughout the twentieth century are multiple protests, discussions and debates on Colston’s legacy as it pertains to the city, with a growing consensus that the status quo could not be maintained given his direct role in slave-trading. Yet the decision to remove Colston’s

¹⁵ Western Daily Press Archive, ‘What Bristol Owes to Edward Colston’, 13 November 1936, [accessed 5 December 2021].

¹⁶ Robinson, pp.7, 78.

statue was never taken by Bristol City Council and nor did it deliver on its pledge to add a new plaque detailing Colston's career in the RAC and its legacy of enslavement.

A conflict between the fluidity of history, given the nature of new insights and contexts perpetually arising, and the semi-permanent nature of public monuments adorning Britain's civic spaces, led to a paralysis of indecision. Instead, the statue was brought down by the citizens of Bristol after a century of complaint, and now lies in the M Shed museum adorned with anti-slaver graffiti, a sequence of events forming an important chapter in the history of Britain in their own right. In fact, analysis of Google's search trends index reveals that in June 2020, the month the statue of Colston fell, the resulting swell of media coverage triggered more internet searches relating to slavery in Britain than at any other time since records began, in 2004.¹⁷

David Olusoga, professor of public history at the University of Manchester, provided commentary to *The Guardian* when the toppled statue was exhibited:

This time last year it was a mediocre piece of late-Victorian public art that said almost nothing truthful or of interest about Bristol, (or) about Edward Colston. Now I think it's the most important artefact you could select in Britain if you wanted to tell the story of Britain's tortuous relationship with its role in the Atlantic slave trade.¹⁸

¹⁷Based on Google Trends index for searches relating to 'slavery' in the United Kingdom from January 2004 to 15 December 2021, showing that the highest frequency of Google searches related to slavery in the UK to date took place in June 2020. Google Trends Index query took place on 10 December 2021 and can be replicated here <<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=GB&q=slavery>>.

¹⁸*The Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/edward-colston-statue-potent-historical-artefact-david-olusoga>> [accessed 9 December 2021].

Furthermore, analysis undertaken by *The Guardian* in January 2021 suggested that sixty nine other tributes to ‘slave traders, colonialists and racists’ have been removed across the UK since the toppling of the statue reflecting another sensitivity at the heart of the issue.¹⁹ The need to ensure a focus is maintained on education, collaboration and discussion around Britain’s role in slavery, rather than the removal en masse of monuments and tributes which, arguably, will only serve to consolidate an ‘out of sight, out of mind’ ideology at odds with ensuring all aspects of Britain’s complex history remain visible. In conclusion, through the example of the toppling of Edward Colston’s statue this essay has aimed to demonstrate that narratives of slavery and slave-ownership are ever-changing in British history as insights, contexts and perspectives change. From the direct endorsement of slave-trading by Elizabeth I in the sixteenth century to the toppling of Colston’s statue in the twenty-first century, Britain continues to struggle with its collective identity in relation to its past. The rise of British consumerism in the nineteenth century brought opportunities for capitalists eager to exploit the ecosystems of slavery developed by other European nations but evolved, at scale, by Britain. Causing what is today recognised as arguably the most significant abuse of fundamental human rights in history, with the inescapable conclusion that slavery had racism at heart and served to embed racism in British culture across the centuries that followed. Evidence for the employment of euphemisms to elide many slave-traders’ pasts is clearly present in the narratives of history underlying the ‘West India interest’ and across the nineteenth century, in particular. The decades following emancipation in 1833 arguably enabled elite families with roots in slavery to bask in a halo of perceived progress and justice, keeping broader civil enquiry at bay.

Finally, as twenty-first-century Britain acknowledges the anger and frustration symbolised by the toppling of Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol, it’s clear there remains a long distance to travel before the fundamental questions of why and how the legacies of those concerned with the ‘West India interest’ should be preserved. But the toppling of the statue is, itself, a noteworthy moment

¹⁹ *The Guardian* < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/04/edward-colston-statue-potent-historical-artefact-david-olusoga> > [accessed 9 December 2021].

in history and the broad response to it signifies a renewed and potent acknowledgement that education, discussion and inclusive collaboration are paramount now that Britain's past as a significant slave-trading and slave-owning nation has vividly reappeared. This lies in stark contrast to the nineteenth century when, instead, the story of Britain as a progressive moderniser in the post-emancipation years was a far more compelling narrative. As Edward Said says, in his 1993 work, *Culture and Imperialism*:

Was it not true, ran their (Westerners') evaluation, that 'we' had given them (African enslaved people) progress and modernisation? Hadn't we provided them with order and a kind of stability that they hadn't been able to provide for themselves?...Dismissed or forgotten were the ravaged colonial peoples who for centuries endured...a recourseless submission that was the functioning of unchanging European superiority...to keep in mind the millions of Africans who were supplied to the slave trade is to acknowledge the unimaginable cost of maintaining that superiority.²⁰

The toppling of Colston's statue suggests that the plight of people enslaved by Britain is, indeed, finally becoming acknowledged as the 'unimaginable cost' of maintaining superiority during its colonial heyday. How Britain responds to this twenty-first century awakening remains to be seen.

²⁰Edward W. Said, *Culture & Imperialism* (New York: Alfred J. Knopf, 1993), p. 25.

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