

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.

– Desmond Tutu

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Issue 3

‘Who was Edward Colston and why was his statue pulled down?’

By Dave Barnes

How does this link to the Black Lives Matter movement?

How does it link into Britain’s imperial history?

On Monday the 8th of June 2020, the news across Britain was filled with images of a toppled statue in Bristol. The statue was of man called Edward Colston and protestors had pulled him from his plinth (the base upon which a statue stands), rolled him down the street and tipped him into the harbour.

So, who was Edward Colston and why did protestors pull down his statue? Edward Colston lived from 1636-1721 and was a slave trader. Colston was a board member and deputy governor of the Royal African Company. This was a company set up to take part in the Triangular Trade (that you learned about in year 7). In those roles, he helped to oversee the transportation into slavery of an estimated 84,000 Africans. Of them, it is believed, around 19,000 died on slave ships during the infamous Middle Passage from the coast of Africa to plantations in the Americas. Those who survived the Middle Passage were forced to work on plantations growing sugar, cotton and tobacco for the rest of their lives in terrible conditions.

Colston became very wealthy from trading human beings and gave some of his money to the city of Bristol. This money was used to build schools and given to charities to aid the poor. In 1895, 174 years after Colton’s death a statue was put up in the centre of Bristol to commemorate (honour the memory) of his philanthropy (giving money to charity). Streets, schools and a concert hall in Bristol were also named after Colston. The statue did not show how Colston had made his money or remember the people he had caused to suffer.

For the past 30 years, many people in Bristol have campaigned to have information about Colston’s involvement in the slave trade added to the statue. To change the statue from a commemoration of Colston’s charity to include recognition the terrible human cost of his wealth. In 2017, Bristol council agreed to add this information to the statue in the form of a plaque at its base. For three years, there was debate about the exact wording of the plaque and the exact information it should contain. While the debate went on, no plaque was added to the statue. Many people in Bristol were angry that true nature of Colston’s past was not recognised and he continued to be remembered in a positive way.

On 25th May 2020 George Floyd was killed by police officers in Minneapolis, USA. The police officers have been charged with his murder and await trial. George’s cruel and tragic death sparked significant protests across the USA and the rest of the world. Many of these protests have been organised by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. An organisation created in 2013 to campaign against violence towards black communities following several murders of African Americans by the police.

In Bristol, the BLM protest centred on Edward Colston’s stature. The long-term anger at the failure to add a plaque to statue combined with fury over the killing of George Floyd and triggered direct action. Colton’s statue was pulled down by protestors and chucked into the river. At almost the exact spot where Colston’s ships would have unloaded the goods of the Triangular Trade that were the basis of his wealth.

The removal of Colston's statue was a powerful moment that should make us think about racism in Britain and British imperial history. Its removal was triggered by the killing of George Floyd, which was caused by racism in the USA. However, the problem of racism in the USA, especially white racism towards African Americans, has its roots in the history of the British Empire and the Triangular Trade. In a sense, Britain imported racist ideas to America and slave traders like Colston are the ultimate origin of George Floyd's murder. The link between the actions of men like Colston and the origins the BLM movement are clear.

This means we have a duty to be honest about the terrible consequences of Britain's imperial past. Furthermore, we need to understand how that past helps us to understand the present. This duty has informed what we learn in history at OASB from KS3-5 and how it is learned. It has also means we need to review what we learn, and make changes if necessary, to reflect this duty and the changing nature of thinking about the past.

The removal of Colton's statue (and the removal of other statues it has prompted) is not erasing history. It is history. It reflects changing views in society about how we remember our past, about who we should commemorate and whom we should not.

Further reading:

- 1) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest>
Comment by the historian David Olusoga
- 2) 'Natives' By Akala. Available in the school library
- 3) If you have any questions email Mr Barnes or your history teacher.

**Want to get involved in creating next week's
BAME Newsletter?**

Please email:

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Remember you don't have to be an amazing writer to get involved. You're always more than welcome to share ideas/thoughts/feeling and even design skills– all of which can be contributed to the weekly writings.