

How do we best learn from history?

So, after a long battle, Oxford's Oriel College has surrendered to the demand that Cecil Rhodes' statue be removed. Few would dispute that Rhodes' nineteenth century imperialist white supremacist views are now egregiously offensive and intolerable. Yet, as the expatriated Zimbabwean Peter Godwin wrote: 'Rhodes and his cronies fit in perfectly well with their surroundings and conformed to the morality (or lack of it) of the day. As is so often the case, history simply followed the gravitational pull of superior firepower.'

This is an important lesson for all successive epochs and is surely best secured by keeping our historic relics – albeit intelligently contextualised and discussed – rather than simply eliminating them. They are publicly shared and enduring reminders of our human contradictions, follied hubris and perennial failures to match our myths and illusions. Most statues will yield to this scrutiny: Churchill was also an obstinately unrealistic imperialist, Gandhi a racist against black Africans, Queen Victoria the Empress of an intimidated India, Brunel the exploiter of imperilled child labour, all Romans dependent on a slave economy...

But it also works the other way round. Edward Colston, the seventeenth century slave merchant, was also a great philanthropist for the poor and needy. Such is the complexity of human nature, our history and evolution. I, personally, learn about these better when I am confronted by statues and relics. Without them we are left only with sermons from the righteous.