

For rightwing culture warriors, to shed light on past conflict is to insult our history

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Nothing more to say on the statue wars? Events in Newcastle suggest otherwise...

The problem with dishonesty is that you have to remember your most recent falsehoods to at least try to keep your story straight. In their pantomime “war against woke”, the UK’s statue defenders are incapable of remembering what they said just 12 months ago.

Last summer, [when the statue of Edward Colston was toppled](#), those who howled in protest claimed that they were not seeking to defend the reputation of a slave trader – a man complicit in the deaths of 19,000 Africans – but were merely opposed to the destructive way in which the statue had been removed. Toppling statues, or even removing them from public display peacefully, they lectured, entailed “erasing history”.

The answer, they and the government argued, was to leave statues and monuments in place but add contextual details that made visible aspects of the past about which statues had previously been mute. This strategy – “retain and explain” – could be best achieved by attaching plaques to the pedestals on which monuments stand.

Fast forward to 2021 and the same people seem to have forgotten that this was ever their position.

With no statue toppled since Colston’s pavement dive, the statue-philes have been forced to make the most of slim pickings. Hence the hysterical reaction to an [audit of statues and monuments conducted by Newcastle city council](#). The council’s report found that Newcastle has no monuments with direct links to slavery and with no Colston or Cecil Rhodes to worry about, it makes only modest suggestions. These include making changes to a city centre monument to 370 men from north-east regiments who died in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902.

Topped with a statue of Nike, the winged Greek goddess of victory, the Boer war monument has plaques at its base that list the names of men from the region who died in South Africa 120 years ago. In a statement, the council explained that its aim is to “widen public interpretation of the South African war memorial” by installing “two information panels, one to interpret the statute and the other to shed light on its local connections in the city”.

To those whose abilities of recall stretch all the way back to 2020, the council’s proposals sound very much like “retain and explain” and there is not much here to get excited about. No statues are to be removed, never mind toppled. No one is taking the knee or trying to explain how structural racism works. Marcus Rashford is not involved and the Duchess of Sussex has not chosen to fly to [Newcastle](#) and wastefully hurl avocados at the monument.

Yet in culture war Britain, even the non-story of Newcastle’s statue audit is enough to pull the hair-trigger of the anger-industrial complex. Just a few years ago, before politicians and newspapers had mastered the art of using half-forgotten colonial conflicts to whip up anger and division, a report by

a heritage committee, set up by the local council of a northern city, would have struggled to win space on the pages of even the local papers. Yet with wearying predictability, the council's proposal to provide additional historical information became national news and was caricatured as "cancelling history".

Meanwhile, the manifest and indisputable fact that the Anglo-Boer war was, as the council called it, a "colonialist enterprise" was deliberately presented as a libel rather than a statement of fact. With similarly tedious inevitability, the report was mischaracterised as "virtue signalling" and "erasing our history", an especially trite phrase – even in this strong field – given that all wars other than civil wars, by their nature, generate histories that are never solely "ours".

One military historian who must have missed the "retain and explain" memo concluded that the council's proposals had been arrived at because the monument "no longer suits the current cultural zeitgeist". It is this threadbare, non-argument that best reveals the deep dishonesty of the pro-statue lobby.

Their repeated claim in defence of statues to mass murderers and memorials to colonial wars is that, guided by the "standards of the time", our ancestors universally regarded empire as uncontroversial, naturally excused the violence that underwrote it and always celebrated its builders and defenders as heroes. None of that is true, particularly when it comes to the Anglo-Boer war.

Many people at the time regarded the conflict as a grubby war of aggression, motivated by British ambitions to seize the gold and diamond reserves of southern Africa. Others worried, with good reason, that the war was fuelling anti-British sentiment across the world. Indeed, volunteers from numerous nations travelled to the war zone and joined the Boers' ranks against the British.

The scorched earth policy adopted by the British in the final phase of the conflict, which entailed the imprisoning of Boer civilians in concentration camps, as they were named and described at the time, led to the deaths of around 30,000 Boer women and children. When made public, the horrors of the camps strengthened a significant anti-war movement in Britain and appalled even ardent supporters of the empire. The deaths in other British camps of around 20,000 black Africans were scarcely commented upon, by either side, in this "white man's war".

The statue obsessives claim to be defending the soldiers whom the Newcastle monument remembers, yet they cannot explain how pretending that the conflict in which they fell was glorious honours their memory.

But then this is not really about the young soldiers of 1900. It is about the ageing culture warriors of 2021, people so opposed to honestly examining our imperial past that they misrepresent even the most modest acts of reassessment. Like Dorian Gray, they are so fearful of uncomfortable truths that they seek to lock away history's mirror.

The irony here is that the history that Newcastle city council aims to empower the people of my home town to better understand contains exactly the sorts of harsh realities and ugly complexities that, if properly discussed, could help awaken us from our colonial dreamtimes.

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P.S.

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/15/for-the-culture-war-warriors-shedding-light-on-any-conflict-is-insult-to-our-past>