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UK: Those who tore down Colston's statue helped lead us to the truth about slavery and the monarchy

Tuesday 11 April 2023, by [KORAM Kojo](#) (Date first published: 7 April 2023).

BLM protesters in Bristol were accused, in 2020, of 'erasing history'. Now we know they have flooded it with light

In the summer of 2020, there was perhaps no moment that divided the nation more sharply than when Black Lives Matter protesters tore a statue of 17th-century slave trader Edward Colston from its plinth in the centre of Bristol and [rolled it into the harbour](#).

While few critics went so far as to defend Colston and his legacy, they argued that this type of direct action was "erasing history". Britain's prime minister at the time, Boris Johnson, [claimed that](#) to remove statues of figures like Colston from the public square was "to lie about our history". Sir Trevor Phillips [complained that](#) Britain's public history was being "erased entirely" and Nigel Farage went a step further, [describing the protesters](#) who removed the statue as "a new form of the Taliban", desecrating Britain's cultural memory for their own amusement and dragging the country into [Year Zero](#)-like ignorance.

Yet rather than lead us into an era of collective forgetting, the tearing down of Colston's statue transported his name - and deeds - into the public consciousness. This week, the renewed attention towards Colston bore fruit when [the Guardian revealed](#) that a historian, Brooke Newman, had unearthed a document showing that in 1689, Colston transferred £1,000 of shares in the Royal African Company (RAC) to none other than King William III. The exposure of the extent to which the monarch was financially intertwined with the slave trading company of which Colston was a director does not teach us less about history, it teaches us more.

The activities of colonial companies like the RAC, which enjoyed a monopoly over the English trade in slaves from the west African coast, are often presented as distinct from the internal history of the British Isles. Yes, there may have been the odd massacre performed in the service of British imperialism, but these were the actions of rogue merchants in distant tropical lands, operating far from the watchful eye of Westminster and the living embodiment of British sovereignty, the monarch. This makes it easy to delete the actions of the RAC from the national record: the [84,500 men, women and children](#) who, during Colston's time with the company, were taken by its ships from their homes in west Africa to suffer a life of slavery in the New World. A quarter of them would not even survive the journey, so horrific were the conditions aboard Colston's ships.

Yet this separation between internal royal histories and external colonial histories has always been a blind spot in our understanding of the past. Companies like the RAC needed to be granted a royal charter just to exist: they couldn't be just registered and incorporated like companies today. And furthermore, as the Guardian's [research has illustrated](#), there was often a cosy personal connection

between the ruling kings and queens of this island and its slave-trading and colonial companies. This extended from James II acting as a governor of the Royal African Company to George II being a shareholder of the South Sea Company, which held the contract to supply enslaved Africans to the Spanish colonies in South America.

This greater understanding of the connection between colonialism and the monarchy carries implications not only for our image of the past, but for ideas about the contemporary role of the monarchy, both at home and abroad. The new revelations arrive at a difficult time for the monarchy, with the coronation of a new king seeking to shore up the disruption caused by the passing of the long-reigning Elizabeth II. A number of Commonwealth countries have made moves towards removing the monarch as the head of state in their ostensibly independent countries. Leading politicians in [Australia](#) and [Jamaica](#), countries where the British monarchy traditionally enjoyed a great deal of public support, are now campaigning to follow in the [footsteps of Barbados](#), which transitioned to a parliamentary republic in 2021, with the island's prime minister, Mia Mottley, heralding the moment as a step towards the Caribbean island "[leaving our colonial past behind](#)".

The rising unpopularity of the British monarchy in the once-reliable British West Indies was made evident by the [protests that greeted](#) the then Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, William and Kate, during their tour of the region last year. Our understanding of the anger that underwrites these protests is only enriched by the type of research that has been highlighted this week.

The relationship between the British royal family and the former colonies isn't just a question of symbolism or constitutional law. It is an entry point into a deep and bloody history that is essential to understanding our relationship with the rest of the world. It is a history that the lid has only just started to be lifted on. And for that, we should thank the protesters in Bristol, who decided to tear through the veil of secrecy that enshrouds much of this country's past, despite the [charges of criminality](#) and vandalism that they knew they would have to face afterwards.

Dr Kojo Koram teaches at the School of Law at Birkbeck, University of London

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The Guardian

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