

What does the debate about statues tell us about history?

History has been at the heart of the news this week as discussions continue about the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests against statues of historical figures in many parts of Britain. I hope that it has got many of you thinking about why history can be so controversial, and what your own view is of who and what should be commemorated from our past, and how.

Everyone will have their own opinion about whether it is right or wrong to pull down statues of figures from the past who are connected with parts of our history that we do not wish to commemorate, or at least celebrate, such as the slave trade. It is an important discussion to have, but I don't wish to set out an argument here – rather, I want you to think about what this week's events have shown us about the way in which history works.

I came across this quotation from George Orwell's *1984* on social media in a discussion about this week's events:

Every record has been destroyed or falsified, every book rewritten, every picture has been repainted, every statue and street building has been renamed, every date has been altered. And the process is continuing day by day and minute by minute. History has stopped.

This quotation is exactly what is not happening. When Orwell wrote this, he was describing how a totalitarian society could simplify and erase history to allow them to indoctrinate people, stopping opposition and discussion. What we have seen this week is an explosion in the open discussion about our past. What we have seen this week is not that history has stopped, but that history has been working, perhaps a bit more quickly than usual. You have all done work in History about how interpretations of historical figures and events change over time as different groups of historians re-tell stories about the past to emphasise the aspects that are important to them, selecting different evidence to suit their view. You might remember studying how the Tudors argued that King John was a good king because he argued with the Pope like the Tudor King Henry VIII. The Victorians argued that John was a bad king because he lost control of lands in France and Ireland, which contrasted with the Victorians' view that it was important to control an empire. What we have seen in the last week has shown the process of interpretations of the historical figure on statues being re-formed. Usually this happens gradually, without people noticing. However, this week the process has made news headlines as the different interpretations in the debate have been so far apart. The statue of Winston Churchill in London which was at the centre of one protest is a good example of this: for many people in Britain, he represents the leader whose heroic resistance in the Second World War helped Britain to survive the dangers of Nazi invasion. For others, his views on topics such as India's campaign for independence can be seen as racist. In the last week, we have been seeing a re-evaluation of interpretations of Churchill as a younger generation who feel less connection to the Second World War have been prepared to criticise him. For these campaigners, Churchill's views about the British Empire, which many people would see as racist by today's standards, are more important than his role as a war leader. Feelings have run high on both sides this week as views put forward from both sides have challenged and sometimes offended others. A little bit like the movement of plates in the Earth's crust, while usually the arguments about the past change gradually without anyone noticing, this week they have moved dramatically and with resistance, like an earthquake.

One interesting aspect of the events this week has been to consider why some statues were put up in the first place. This is particularly true of the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol. His statue was not put up during his lifetime, or around the time of his death, but more than 170 years after his

death, in 1895. This tells us a lot about the views of the Victorian society that paid for the statue. It shows that at the time Britain was in competition with France and other European nations to try to seize as many colonies in Africa as they could, they were prepared to overlook Colston's connections with the slave trade. It tells us that in a society marked by huge differences between the rich and the poor, in which the government played little role in charity, the Victorians wanted to praise someone they saw as a successful businessman who left money to support the poor in Bristol when he died.

Beyond the arguments about statues, there have also been many calls for changes to the school curriculum to reflect diversity more. We can again see different interpretations of the past in these arguments. It is impossible to study all of the past, so therefore we must make choices about what we include and what we leave out or only look at briefly. Everyone agrees that what you choose to include in a school curriculum will be important in shaping people's views. Where people disagree is in their judgements about what are the most important topics to study and which to leave out. In the History Department, we have been moving to include more topics to form a more diverse curriculum, such as when Year 7 studied the Mali Empire in medieval Africa, or Year 9 studied the history of India from 1600 to 1947. Of course we can do more, and we continually consider how best to do this. I would encourage you, the students, to think about this as well, and welcome your suggestions. But we must also consider the other important stories that form part of the syllabus, such as the development of the rights that ordinary people have in Britain. Only by allowing people to use evidence from the past to tell many different stories do we enable people to have the kind of debates which Orwell was showing to be so important to society.

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