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Should They Stay or Should They Go?: Contested Statues

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Percy Bysshe Shelley and Horace Smith both wrote poems inspired by the announcement by the British Museum in 1817 that it had acquired a bust of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramesses II, a fragment of a huge statue from the thirteenth century BCE. Both poems were titled *Ozymandias* – Greek for Ramesses. And they explore the theme of the inevitable passing of the memory of rulers despite their pretensions to greatness and the erection of monuments to perpetuate memory of their greatness.

For Shelley, the monument to Ramesses had suffered the ravages of time:

> Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
> Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand
> Half sunk, a shattered visage lies…

Today there are some who are unwilling to allow time to take its toll on the statues of those whose role in our history is contested and, in some instances, reviled. There are calls for removal and obliteration.

Debates about the place of monuments, such as the statue of Captain Cook in Sydney's Hyde Park, reached a recent high point during the Black Lives Matter protests across Australia in mid 2020. As Bruce Scates notes in his opinion piece 'Call to topple monuments is an opportunity for debate' this monument is an instance of what historian Graeme Davison called 'the heroic age' of colonial statuary. Scates adds:

> Viewed from every angle the statue proclaims dominion: a hand raised triumphantly… In 1770, without the knowledge or consent of Aboriginal people, this junior naval officer claimed possession of all of Eastern Australia for the British crown. Cook thus set in train a tragic collision of cultures we still live with today.[1]

Considered in this context it is hardly surprising that there are demands from Australia's First Nations people and others for the Cook statue to be removed. The removal of statues to historically contentious figures has been a persistent theme both nationally and internationally for some time.

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We have already witnessed the toppling of some notable statues dedicated to 'heroes' revealed to be perpetrators of slavery, racism and oppression – often carried out as part of imperial conquest. Journalist Tyler Stiem's thought provoking article 'Statue wars: what should we do with troublesome monuments?' examined the 'global protest movement to tear down urban memorials that reinforce racism'.[2] Stiem highlights the removal of the 1902 statue to Cecil Rhodes in Cape Town. That statue came down within months of the start of the 'Rhodes Must Fall' protests in March 2015 which began with a bucket of excrement being thrown over it. 'The incident,' he noted, 'attracted national attention and within days had grown into a full-scale protest.'

In June 2020 the world watched as the statue of the seventeenth century slave trader Edward Colston was pulled from its pedestal in Bristol and thrown into the harbour as part of the 'Black Lives Matter' protests. According to the Smithsonian's website, during his tenure as the deputy governor of the Royal African Company Colston was responsible for the transportation of '84,500 kidnapped African men, women and children'. The statue was later retrieved and the Bristol City Council put it into storage. There are plans to eventually re-house it in a museum and exhibit it alongside Black Lives Matter placards.

While removing contentious statues from public view may address concerns about their unwanted presence, it is important to ensure that the contested history they embody is not also erased from society's memory. We need to develop an acceptable framework for dealing with such monuments within their historical context. Opening this up to public discussion will no doubt help in devising possible options. However, commentary following the removal of the Colston statue reveals a division in community attitudes.

Suggestions as to the fate of unwanted statues include breaking them and returning the resulting dust and metals to the soil; reinterpreting them to provide both sides of history with the use of modern technology; adding plaques to explain history from a modern perspective and interpretation; taking the statues off their plinths to bring them down to our height; adding statues of victims as a means of offering a reinterpretation of the past; moving them from their present location and placing them in museums where they could be contextualised and interpreted from varied perspectives or using them to create statue parks.

In the ABC news item 'Four ways to help settle Australia's colonial statue debate' on ABC News Indigenous elder Aunty Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor is quoted as saying that she would like to see statues 'replaced with statues of Aboriginal people'.[3] This is a telling comment given the absence of statues commemorating Australia's First Nations people. Australia like other countries that began life as colonial outposts has an over-abundance of statues of white males.

The destruction of statues of those who have fallen from power, and who represent now discredited regimes or were in some way responsible for crimes against humanity, is a vexed issue. Understandable on one level, it nevertheless raises questions about the impact destruction would have on the fabric of history. Just as we cannot – and should not – censor or destroy the records of past regimes, for the reason that we need to know how good or bad they were, statues also contribute to our understanding of the past. While generally agreeing with Daniel Libeskind – architect of Berlin's Jewish Museum – who is quoted as asking: 'How can a country go on with statues of oppressors and of dictators?' – the destruction of unwanted statues creates risks.[4] Not only do we risk erasing history's 'memory' we also risk pandering to every temporary fashion and legitimising the turnover of cultural values according to the fickle attitudes of those in power from time to time. This is a feature of totalitarian regimes. In order to avoid these risks we need to consider other options.

Statue parks offer an alternative to locking them away from view. Lithuania's Grūtas Park, about 130 kilometres south west of the capital Vilnius, is the home of a privately funded outdoor museum housing a collection of Soviet statues which were taken down and dumped in different places after Lithuania became independent in 1990.[5] Other examples include Memento Park (Hungary), Fallen Monument Park

(Moscow) and Coronation Park (Delhi). While statue parks may not be everyone's ideal they do provide an opportunity for society to deal with the unwanted and discredited remnants of the past. Displaying the statues in this way provides the opportunity to explain the context in which they were created and the reason why the figures represented are no longer honoured.

Whether discarded statues are maintained in museums or parks there are ongoing cost associated with their maintenance. This could be a factor influencing decisions about their future. However, it is now possible to preserve digital images of statues as they appeared in their original positions even if the statues are to be removed or destroyed. While not advocating the wholesale pulverising of unwanted statues and monuments and replacement with digital surrogates, we are fortunate that there are ways of documenting their existence if that is to happen.

In July 2020 the Council of the Royal Australian Historical Society (RAHS) considered its public position on the future of now unwanted statues, given the widespread and ongoing dialogue. Councillors agreed that 'context is fundamental to the practice of history, which requires a nuanced approach to interpreting multiple sources so we can understand past experiences'. Its position statement notes that:

> **As public statues, memorials or plaques embody cultural memory, the RAHS neither condones nor supports their arbitrary defacement, removal or destruction. Instead, the RAHS suggests that alternative interpretations of public statues, memorials or plaques could be displayed and/or communicated to address any expressed issues of contention or validity.**

The RAHS supports the establishment of a community-based process that could: determine the heritage significance of public statues, memorials or plaques in terms of the Burra Charter;[6] address, develop and communicate contemporary interpretations of public statues, memorials or plaques; and review and advise upon any formal applications made to civic authorities to alter, remove or destroy public statues, memorials or plaques.

Ultimately, the RAHS does not have a single answer to the question: should these vestiges of flawed historical narratives stay or go? It depends on the circumstances of each case. But some things are clear. There is a need for Australia to redress historical and current wrongs against First Nations people. The issue of statues should not distract us from the failure of successive governments to achieve that redress in practical ways affecting the daily life of people and we need to persuade government to recognise that continuing failure and correct the situation. However, there is also a need to achieve redress in matters of symbolism. In that context there is a need for ongoing consultation – in particular with Australia's First Nations people – about the future of contested memorials.

Endnotes

1. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2020.
2. *Guardian*, 26 September 2018.
3. Posted online 16 June 2020 available at https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-16/four-ways-to-help-settle-australias-colonial-statue-debate/12356234 (accessed 18 November 2020).
4. BBC News 25 June 2020.
5. *Economist*, 30 August 2017.
6. Australia ICOMOS, *The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance*, Australia ICOMOS, 2013.