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ARTICLES (PEER REVIEWED)

The State We Are In: UK Public History since 2011

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Introduction

The last decade and a bit have been years of political turbulence for the United Kingdom (UK) and its four constituent nations: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It has also been a rich time for public historians to work in which, however, despite increasingly obvious state interventions into representations of the past, the role of the state has remained relatively unexamined.¹ This is particularly surprising given that much of the funding for public history work in the UK comes directly and indirectly from the state, the institutions of government, under political direction. Since the late 1990s, governmental arrangements in the UK have become ever more complex. While the four nations have had different arrangements in the past – most notably Scotland retained its own legal and education systems – devolution of UK state powers to the Scottish Parliament, Welsh Senedd and the Northern Ireland Assembly have meant that the multi-nations state has increasingly created multi-states.

The system that operates is a mix of devolved matters where decision making is delegated to the legislative bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and reserved matters that are decided upon by the UK Parliament, even though they have effect in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The historical roots of the reserved powers model can be found in the growth of the British Empire. Just as they once differed across the Empire, they now differ between the three countries with devolved responsibilities determined by the UK government in England.² Such arrangements are complex, inevitably produce tensions, and as we argue

have allowed for a degree of direction by UK politicians and the UK or central state. For example, the devolution settlements include heritage, however, the UK politicians and their civil servants continue to exercise power over heritage and cultural decisions that can be justified as UK wide.

The role of the central UK state became obviously visible when, in February 2021, the UK government's then culture secretary, Oliver Dowden, sought to intervene in historical debate by 'summoning' twenty-five of the UK's heritage bodies to a summit on contested history in which, *The Times* reported, they would be 'reminded that public funds must not be used for political purposes'. Dowden also told the press that he was concerned to 'defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down'. Dowden like other Conservative politicians in England, were partly responding to initiatives taken by the National Trust. The Trust, the largest heritage and membership organisation in England and Wales, had commissioned research to better understand the historic links between the heritage sites it managed and Britain's slave trade.³ In response to the 'summons', the UK Museums Association, an independent advocacy body, released a statement expressing concerns that the government's actions breached the 'arm's-length' principle of government funding.⁴

In this article, we explain why understanding the role of the central state in public history in the UK has become increasingly important over the last twelve years. In doing so, we begin with a brief overview of the political and public history contexts in the UK, including the enormous appetite for past-talk that has facilitated the rise of non-university based public historians who are working across a range of sectors, as well as the very recent rise of taught public history at postgraduate levels within the universities. We consider the cultural history wars that have raged in the UK over the last decade and look set to continue for some time to come. We also look at the possible links between this context and the promotion of wider heritage activities through state directed funding.

The Conservative Party has been the ruling party in government in the UK since 2010 but rely almost solely on English votes. They have failed to secure a majority in Scotland since the 1950s. Wales has a long tradition of Labour voting and the Conservative Party has never contested seats in Northern Ireland.⁵ While the Conservatives came to power by forming a coalition with the centrist Liberal Democrat party in 2010, there was an early movement by the new government towards the political right, evidenced, for example, by the adoption of the 'Hostile Environment' immigration policy. This was against a background of the emergence of a new political consensus on the right of politics, unified around demands for greater national sovereignty and independence from the European Union (EU).

The 2016 EU membership referendum which came to be known as 'Brexit' has widely been seen as an attempt by the then-Prime Minister David Cameron to placate the demands of the Eurosceptic wing of his party. In line with the voting patterns outlined above, only England and Wales voted decisively to leave the EU. While there has historically been a leftist argument against the EU, which sees it as undemocratic and capitalist, the Brexit outcome was widely received as a victory for those on the right. The second half of the decade has seen the Conservative Party move further rightward with centrist Members of the UK Parliament resigning or removed. The political shift has not only included anti-immigration policy, but also a revival of celebratory nationalism, with a series of political assaults on institutions perceived as oppositional, including heritage organisations, universities and the legal system. This in part has become known as Britain's culture wars.

Britain's Public History landscape

The UK prides itself on a strong tradition of history from below, dating back to at least the 1960s with the emergence of the History Workshop movement. While the term 'public history' began to be used in Britain and Northern Ireland later than in some other places – notably the US – activities and approaches that we now recognise as public history have long been a part of the cultural landscape. Not all UK public

history is ‘history from below’. Indeed, public appetite for history consumption can be seen across all parts of population and in all nations. Nonetheless, there is a hunger for the stories of ‘ordinary’ people. For example, the wildly popular *Who Do you Think You Are?* television programme – a successful cultural export with ten international versions – mixes this appetite with celebrity culture. In each episode, a celebrity traces their ancestry, with the famous chosen to contribute to an overall aim of celebrating British diversity – of course, ‘shocking’ discoveries about the safely distant past also make for good television.⁶ The long-running programme both indulges and encourages a widespread passion for family history research.

Another big television success, which made the transition to film in 2019, is the long-running drama *Downton Abbey*. The series follows the inhabitants of a grand country house from the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 to the turbulence of the 1920s. This fictionalised history spawned what has been described as the ‘Downton Abbey effect’⁷ – a significant and sustained rise in visitor numbers to stately homes in the last decade. However, work still needs to be done to fully understand what is driving this interest. Named after the house in which the drama is set, it follows the aristocratic Crawley family, but also the lives of the many servants who form their household.

In a 2012 interview, the creator of *Downton Abbey*, Julian Fellowes, suggested that his work has had a significant influence on the curators of historic houses, so that servants’ living quarters and experiences are now an important part of the story being told.⁸ Stately homes are only one part of the UK’s very large museums and heritage sector, involving everything from small re-enactment societies to historic sites, such as Royal Palaces, and the aforementioned National Trust. In the last ten years those catering for the mass history audience for history are increasingly self-identifying as public historians. The rise of these media public historians in the UK also points to the heterogeneity of this public history appetite. A look at three of Britain’s ‘history influencers’ demonstrates this.

David Olusoga is a Black British historian who also has training in journalism and began his career in television research and production, before presenting *The World’s War* in 2014. He has used his celebrity status to draw attention to Black British history through television documentaries and books. In 2019 he was appointed Professor of Public History at the University of Manchester. Like Olusoga, Greg Jenner started out in television working as a historical advisor on the popular children’s history-comedy programme *Horrible Histories*. Jenner has since developed a strong profile of his own including as a historian of celebrity. His BBC podcast *You’re Dead to Me* takes a comedic approach and applies it to history with adults. During the pandemic lockdowns in 2020, Jenner produced a new podcast, *Homeschool History* directly aimed at home schooling children and their parents.

Our final example of public history ‘influencers’ who cross over into the academic sphere is Suzanne Alice Lipscomb, a historian of the early modern era who started as a research curator at one of the Royal Palaces historic sites and then moved into academia. However, as an academic she continued to be widely sought after as a history authority in television, again mostly for the BBC, and continues to play a role in heritage interpretation. In 2019 she won the National Trust awards for the ‘We Are Bess’ exhibition. More recently she has been developing a popular podcast. Each of these three examples, along with others, have developed careers in public history that cross-over into university teaching. Jenner guest lectures with at least two public history taught programmes and takes students on placement to work on his productions. Most significantly, they have all built significant media profiles while championing a public history that moves beyond grand narratives.

Alongside this new generation of popular historians, there has been a recent dramatic growth in the number of postgraduate taught programmes in public history in England, Wales and Northern Ireland along with an increase in full-time public history academics. There are currently taught courses in nine universities, more than double the four operating in 2015, as well as a growing number of undergraduate public history options. The postgraduate courses each have different approaches, specialities and balances

between core and optional modules. Queen's Belfast, for example, has focused on conflict and conflict resolution within its own historical context of Northern Ireland and the legacy of thirty years of ethno-nationalist conflict. Manchester Metropolitan University has a strong heritage component with emphases on regional archives and museums such as Manchester's People's History Museum, self-styled as 'the national museum of democracy'.

There is an evident overlap between taught heritage courses and public history across many of the programmes, although some British public historians are keen to disentangle the two. At Newcastle University, the new public history MA programme, presented for the first time in 2021-22, was only established after making a clear delineation between public history and longer established postgraduate programmes in heritage and museum studies at the University. The Newcastle programme is imbued with a sense of public history as an international project while encouraging an engagement with history that matters to the public. At Royal Holloway, Newcastle and Queens programmes there is a substantial oral history presence underpinning the importance of understanding public receptions of history.

All this increased activity has taken place against the backdrop of a greater emphasis having been placed on demonstrating 'impact' within the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the current mechanism by which UK academics and their universities are assessed, ranked, and partially funded.⁹ As Mark Donnelly notes:

It was no accident that public history was brought into the disciplinary mainstream around the same time that political pressure was intensifying for historians to justify their work – and hence their funding – in relation to the agendas of public engagement and vocational skills.¹⁰

The increase in taught MA programmes also corresponds with the 2012 increase in tuition fees in England and Wales for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, which is part of the move to justify higher education in terms of graduates' employment outcomes. The fact that Scotland has its own education system, and a different student fee regime, may be one reason that it is the only one of the four nations still to introduce a full public history programme.

It would, however, be erroneous to conclude that performance metrics have been the only factor shaping the type of public history offered or practiced by UK universities. One of the longest running courses is at Ruskin College, Oxford, and the programme continues to maintain a political orientation first developed by the pioneering socialist historian Raphael Samuel and run by Hilda Kean for over a decade from 1996. The other veteran programme is at Royal Holloway, which has a strong oral history component and an orientation towards public reception of the past. It was founded by Justin Champion, Amanda Vickery, Anna Whitelock and Graham Smith, with significant media connections and a declared commitment to a civic responsibility that was frequently expressed by Champion. In 2010, for example, Champion publicly responded to Niall Ferguson's criticism of history teaching in schools noting that, 'Having established that money rules the world, he [Ferguson] now pronounces on the everyday experiences of schoolchildren and the competence of dedicated schoolteachers: "all junk" – too much Martin Luther King and not enough Martin Luther.'¹¹

More broadly, and whatever political interpretation is made, it is our view that universities within the nations that make up the UK are more broadly developing their own approaches to public history. Within and between the four nations there are therefore differing flavours of UK public history. Wales, and in particular colleagues at Bangor University, have led the way in terms of developing four nations' history. In Scotland, the University of Glasgow has led on decolonisation, not only delivering taught modules and school-based initiatives exploring Scotland's role in slavery but also providing £20 million worth of reparations through funding a joint centre for development research, which will also include history, with the University of the West Indies. Northern Ireland, and particularly Queens Belfast, as noted above, has been specialising in conflict and resolution in both political conflict and in social justice issues. In England,

Royal Holloway, since 2015, has celebrated the geographic connection to the Magna Carta with initiatives around social justice. In 2017, Newcastle University commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King's visit when he was awarded an honorary degree by the University – the only UK university to do so. The commitment of public historians at Newcastle and Royal Holloway is reflected in the *Historians for History* blog that both have an interest in.¹²

State Sponsorship through the Heritage Lottery Fund

Britain and Northern Ireland's most significant history sponsor is the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF, previously the Heritage Lottery Fund), one of twelve distributors of the monies raised through the National Lottery – a state sanctioned form of gambling. Founded in 1984, the NLHF has since shaped a great deal of the public's engagement with the past. It has also been used to underpin government ideology especially in relation to 'Our Islands history'. This is the idea of the UK having a single history, which in the late 2000s attracted the attention of former Prime Minister David Cameron. The inspiration was a children's history book originally published in 1905 and republished in 2005,¹³ a book Cameron said he had enjoyed as a child. The idea that history in the UK ought to celebrate the distinguished role of these islands in global history began to be propagated through heritage fund investment, as well as through the efforts of then-Education Minister Michael Gove to introduce a national, that is only in England, history curriculum that would 'celebrate the distinguished role of these islands in the history of the world.'¹⁴

From 2011 huge amounts of money were spent on projects that fitted this idea. Indeed, the more the UK seemed to be fracturing, the more emphasis was placed on Our Islands' Story. And it was an initiative that through central heritage funding could reach into all four nations that make up the UK even if its original foothold had been posited for school teaching in England. In 2011, spending from the heritage fund was £249 million. This included £35 million granted by the fund to the National Library of Scotland for collecting letters and other materials relating to Charles Darwin, Samuel Smiles and David Livingstone into a new archive named after John Murray. John Murray was an Edinburgh publisher who had published the work of those leading Victorian thinkers. Part of the 2011 budget, amounting to £43 million, was used to pay for the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, a historical extravaganza described as a love letter to Britain. In celebration of the workers of Britain, director Danny Boyle managed to sidestep issues of class and inequality, as well as other contentious parts of Britain's past, including slavery. A decade on one journalist was moved to ask if the ceremony had been 'the last gasp of liberal Britain'.¹⁵

However, state sponsored versions of the past were not easily imposed, and the result has been uneven. A year after the Olympics had been held in London, Michael Gove was running into opposition from teachers and the general public and his attempts to introduce education reforms centred around the teaching of history were floundering. As a result of push-back by educators and historians, the resulting legislation was much less proscriptive, with the perhaps unintended consequence that there is now little if any compulsory school teaching about empire, colonialism or Black history in the English curriculum.

As if to compensate, and in that same year, the government announced details of a four-year plan of events commemorating Britain's involvement in the First World War. Not all were celebrations of either British patriotism or victory. But most were imbued with a sense of national pride and a recognition of individual sacrifice in defence of imagined historic British 'values'. Between 2014 and 2018, vast amounts of state-controlled funding were used on commemoration. This included £35 million pounds for refurbishing the Imperial War Museum's First World War galleries; a battlefield tours programme for school students; and a youth engagement scheme with a £15 million budget. Many of these programmes – particularly those directed at young people – included an expectation of outputs to communicate 'heritage' to an external audience. A £10 million cultural programme, 14-18 NOW, was directed by Jenny Waldman, creative producer of the London 2012 Olympic ceremony, with an additional 107 projects commissioned in more

than 220 locations across the UK, along with a range of un-funded, voluntary led local events. At the same time, there were less visible but nonetheless important commemorations marking the Second World War. The British state also sponsored the Magna Carta 800 celebrations in this short period, presented as an expression of English liberty¹⁶ that was often conflated as British at the time. This conflation did not play out well in Scotland.¹⁷

The Culture Wars

As noted above, this investment in telling the history of an imagined British identity took place against a background of political upheaval and an existential threat to the UK, notably the Scottish Independence campaign and vote of 2013-14 and the Brexit campaign and ballot of 2016. These crises have not ended. Indeed, the UK's leaving of the European Union on 31 January 2020 has precipitated new conversations and debates about how united the United Kingdom really is, despite divisions being partially obscured by the Covid-19 calamity. After-shocks from Brexit have included the accelerating support for an independent Scotland, the possibility of a united Ireland, a new economic direction taken in Wales and turmoil in England's ruling party expressed in part with a run of leadership contests. In addition, debates about the meaning of Empire are intensifying, partly driven by the Conservative Party's post-Brexit orientation towards Commonwealth nations.¹⁸ Alongside this has been a counter-narrative of decolonisation, including in heritage organisations and universities, which was highlighted by the re-energising of the Black Lives Matter campaign in 2020.

Having invested so much in a particular view of the past – an islands' story that celebrated an invented uniqueness and unity of the UK as a global power – the reactions to public history by Conservative politicians and partisan media outlets have been largely hostile. This has included criticism of heritage organisations and universities as 'woke' – a term co-opted from African-American vernacular and used to dismiss those who seek to become more aware of structural oppressions and the legacies of past injustice. Indeed, the UK seems to be embroiled in a new battle over who owns the right to interpret the past. This has included open criticism of historical analyses that detract from celebrations of perceived past greatness. One Conservative MP, for example has claimed: 'Defending our history and heritage is our era's Battle of Britain.'¹⁹ While the government's education secretary urged schools to concentrate on 'celebrating our great nation's history and the important role that we have played in the world and shaping the world for the better'.²⁰ In contrast, the political opposition has responded by demanding that Black History be part of the school curriculums in the nations that make up the UK.²¹

This debate recently led to popular media criticism of historians and heritage organisations, many of whom argued that they were simply seeking to offer a more balanced view of that history.²² However, it is difficult to tell how serious the government is in making these criticisms. As some conservative critics have argued, state funding for heritage continues, including the parts that they do not like.²³ Public historians and public-facing historians have made a broad spectrum of responses, ranging from concern that academic freedom is at risk through to a belief that the Conservative government is simply playing to its right-wing supporters, and attempting to use a cultural history war to detract from larger issues facing the UK. The latter reading usually sees such political expediency as sound and fury rather than as a serious threat.

While agreeing that much government rage is confected and performative, directing attention away from economic and constitutional predicaments, we would also argue that such an approach seriously underestimates the pernicious way that the past is being used to promote anti-history and to encourage social and political division, especially through tacit excusing of racism and misogyny. One marker of this is the 'new normal' in which heritage organisations and academics find themselves on the receiving end of hate-posting across social media. Another is the attempt to intervene in history teaching in higher

education. The authors of the government policy paper *Higher education: free speech and academic freedom*, published in February boldly asserts that,

a head of faculty should not force or pressure academics to teach from a [sic] their own ideological viewpoint, or to only use set texts that comply with their own viewpoint. This applies equally to contested political ideologies that are not associated with a particular political party or view, such as ‘decolonising the curriculum’.²⁴

Whether public opinion is shifting towards a more sanitised version of the past has yet to be seen, but we suspect that this is polarising opinion rather than changing it. Evidence for this can be seen in the responses to the Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities released in March 2021. The government report was commissioned as a reaction to the Black Lives Matter protests of the previous summer including the toppling of the statue of the slave owner Edward Colson in Bristol, England. The Report, with its claim that the UK is not institutionally racist has simply entrenched existing positions. It also argues that imperialism, including slavery and military conquest, extended the benefits of Britishness to people of colour. It restates opposition to decolonising the curriculum and calls for a more positive interpretation of the British Empire. The report has been widely derided, including by health professionals, educationalists, sociologists, historians and public historians.²⁵

At least equally concerning are the ways that state funding can be used to take potentially radical work and make it safe. This kind of influence is usually hidden, but there are hints. Take the work of Jeremy Deller who is perhaps best known for his 2001 re-enactment of the Battle of Orgreave, a civil conflict within the 1984-85 miners’ strike. His most recent work, ‘We’re Here Because We’re Here’, a collaboration with Rufus Norris, was funded as part of the 14-18 NOW cultural programme as a commemoration of the Battle of the Somme. This is not to argue that all public history connected to war memory is necessarily reactionary. ‘We’re Here’ certainly follows on from Deller’s earlier work in its recognition of the role ordinary people play in history. Nonetheless, as the title makes clear, the work works to smooth out the rough edges of war memory and to reinforce the idea that taking part in the war ‘effort’ was about fighting for some indefinable sense of Britishness.

Conclusion

The last two decades have seen an intensification of the UK state’s engagement with public representations of the past. The institutions of government have attempted to shape how the public see their past particularly through the selective sponsorship of national commemorative events. Attempts to shape perceptions of the past – especially around a British identity – have also been made through education policy, if arguably less successfully. And when all else has failed, government ministers and their political outriders have cajoled and threatened those who refuse to follow the official line, including heritage organisation.

In writing this piece we have indicated the importance of the UK’s changing relationship with the world, and primarily, Europe, expressed most clearly through Brexit, in celebrations of Britishness in the past. However, we have also suggested that the last two decades have also witnessed a growing tension between the four nations that make up the UK. Amongst public historians there is a growing awareness that we may be at a historical moment in what has become known as ‘four nations’ history’, and we have tried to reflect on that in this article, but in doing so we recognise that even this approach is now subject to the competing interests that exist within the landscapes of UK public history.

In 1998 the pioneer of public history in the UK, Raphael Samuel, used the four nations approach to argue that the break-up of Britain would be potentially liberating.²⁶ The old colonial power would be broken up with England no longer holding sway over the three other and smaller nations. More recently

the historian and commentator David Starkey has taken the four nations approach in a different direction and from a different political perspective. For Starkey, recognising the distinctive difference within the four nations is a way of holding the UK state together. In doing so the UK past is seen as one that should be celebrated rather than appraised.²⁷

This is therefore an especially interesting time for public historians in the UK. The time has passed for shoulder shrugging and expressions of disdain at political and public ignorance. What is required is empirical work that provides a better understanding of the ways history is being used to shape public perceptions of the past, and how that plays out in the present. There is a wealth of work ahead for us as academics within the UK public history community. Another part of that work is to engage in dialogues like this special edition and beyond, that challenge us to turn a critical gaze on our own context. But public history also needs to move beyond the national frame. In part, this is the work that we are beginning at Newcastle University, using international public history to encourage students to re-consider their own context, and in the process building up the next generation of public historians who will push us in new directions. However, public historians continue to need to eat and pay bills, and while the state continues to be the biggest employer (both directly and indirectly), public history shaped by the UK state will need to be carefully navigated. To ignore the influence of state will not only be increasingly difficult as political polarisation continues and the debates become sharper but would also be a mark of poor public history scholarship.

Endnotes

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- 13 This reprint was sponsored by Civitas, a right wing think tank, and backed by the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper see <https://www.civitas.org.uk/2007/07/20/our-island-story-triumphant/> (Accessed 29 July 2022).
- 14 Michael Gove, Hansard Parliamentary Debates, 15 November 2010, column 634, www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011 (Accessed 29 July 2022). The other nations within the UK each have their own national curriculums.
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