

The trouble with people who lived in the past

By David Mitchell

If the campaign against Oxford's statue of Cecil Rhodes were successful, how many other morally dubious forebears would need expunging from memory?



Rhodes Must Fall campaigners outside Oriel College, Oxford. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

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Last week's "imperial tour of racist Oxford", organised by the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign, obviously went extremely well. Did you see the pictures? Crowds of young people enthusiastically viewing the city centre despite the wintry weather, and taking a real interest in its history.

My father is a blue badge tour guide in Oxford and has shown small groups round many of its attractions, often tailoring the tour to the group's particular interests – civil war Oxford, *Alice in Wonderland* Oxford, even Harry Potter Oxford – but he's missed a trick here: "racist Oxford" is clearly the next big thing.

And it's not prejudiced: the young people on the tour weren't racists themselves. They were just intrigued by racism and its history. It's definitely something the blue badge guides should look at: racism tours, of interest to people who hate racism but also, I guess, to racists – it would only be fair to let them in.

You could have imperial tours of sexist Oxford, sexy tours of homophobic Oxford and gay tours of misogynistic Oxford – it’s all about branding. The expression used to be “historic Oxford”, but anything from history is almost certainly also racist, sexist and homophobic. Most of us have had awkward moments when grandparents have strayed into dodgy conversational territory: well, the further back you go in history (with some noble exceptions, most of whom got killed), the dodgier people get. If they’d made a series of *Top Gear* in the 12th century, it would have been enough to make Hitler write to Ofcom – and not just to complain about more bloody medieval repeats.

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The consensus among tourism experts has previously been to downplay the bigoted side of heritage, and instead to push the jousting, wooden beams and cream teas. But who’s to say they’re right? The history of hate has box office. There are a lot more films about war than there are about the seed drill.

The sad thing here, of course – other than all the racism in history which, it goes without saying, doesn’t go without saying – is that the imperial tour’s organisers are unlikely to capitalise on its popularity. That’s the irony. Because they want the key attractions of Oxford’s historic racist centre renamed or removed: they’re demanding that the 17th-century slave owner Christopher Codrington’s name be expunged from the library he used his ill-gotten gains to fund, and that the statue of Cecil Rhodes on the front of Oriel College be taken down.

I grew up in Oxford but, weirdly, our family never went to see the statue of Cecil Rhodes. I suppose it’s always the way – when you live in a place, you never do the touristy stuff. I tell you what though, when I’m next there, I am *definitely* going to see it. In terms of media prominence, it’s become Oxford’s Hollywood sign. And, to add even further to its allure, like Venice, it might not be there much longer.

Personally I find the arguments against the statue’s removal unanswerable, even when they’re made by people – such as the former Australian prime minister, Tony Abbott – who don’t seem to dislike Cecil Rhodes as much as I think they should. I know very little about the man but I’ve always assumed he was an arsehole. And I don’t much like the sound of Cecil Rhodes either.

All I know about Rhodes is that he was a Victorian who made a fortune in colonial Africa – but he’s bound to be horrendous, isn’t he? Call me prejudiced, but I reckon

the sort of rich, 19th-century imperialist to whom the Edwardians raise statues would, in general, lose a benevolence competition to a virus. And that also seems to be the informed view: Rhodes was a racist and a shit.

This nastiness might be a good reason not to erect a statue of him, but that doesn't make it reason enough to tear one down – and, in so doing, destroy valuable evidence of his former veneration. That's really important. In 1911, when Oriel College erected that statue, it was grateful for his money but it also thought he was a great guy. It believed he was right and good. We must never forget that this was once the view of such a man, for two major reasons.

First, because it illustrates the flawed mores of that time; and second, because it reminds us that, in this unjust world, you don't have to be right and good to succeed, or indeed to be deemed right and good. It's crucial to remember that, not just about historical figures, but about those who are deemed (and who deem themselves) right and good today. Such unwavering moral self-confidence was prevalent among the colonial Victorians, and is prevalent among the students organising "Rhodes Must Fall" today. The former group provides ample evidence of the harm that such stony absence of doubt has the potential to do.

That's why this movement frightens me. These campaigners' worthy aim is to make modern Britain learn the lessons of its racist and colonial past, and yet they reckon that will be better achieved by removing evidence of that past. Do they think that we can have the debate about colonialism, about racism, once and for all now, and then just move on, having wiped away all offensive traces of our former ills? Do they really believe that they are simply correct about everything now – that, after millions of years, humanity has cracked it, that the truth about *how to be* has been discovered and must be propagated and enforced? History warns us that terrible things are done by people who think like that.

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Tolerance is out of fashion. Letting people do what they want is losing its cachet. It was a big deal when I was growing up, possibly because of the shadow of the Soviet bloc where personal freedoms were so limited. Such places obviously still exist but they're lower in the public consciousness than they were when old men in fur hats sternly counted the nuclear missiles trundling through Red Square.

The threat to personal freedoms posed by the USSR never impinged upon the consciousness of Britons born in the last 30 years. They weren't raised with a sense of the finity of freedom, of a geographical line beyond which one may not speak one's mind. And if something feels abundant, whether it's liberty or oil, human nature dictates that its value will fall. Maybe that explains the current vogue among students for banning, removing and silencing.

I wish them a merciful treatment by posterity if any of their certainties should turn out to be misplaced.