

## CHAIRMAN'S DISPATCH

# Toppling our heroes

When I sit down to write my Dispatch I look for inspiration not from the past but from the present in order to remind ourselves of the Club's relevance today. Weeks can pass before the catalyst presents itself and I become anxious that it may not be there. Then, as so often happens, it comes out of the blue. This time from the terrible riots in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, which also reminded me of the importance of our North American membership.



Fleetingly, I wondered whether any of Horatio Nelson's statues could ever go the way of Robert E Lee's in Charlottesville and dismissed the idea. After all the Admiral has survived over 200 years, driven off all the revisionist historians and remains a fundamental icon of British national identity, inspirational leadership, duty - and humanity. He had genius and flaws. He was the 'superman with everyone's weaknesses', as the late Tom Pocock put it.

A phone call from Club Chaplain Lynda Sebbage awoke me from this complacency! She quoted an article in the Guardian of 17 August by Afwa Hirsch under the heading, 'Why not topple Nelson - our own white supremacist'. Hirsch writes, "Admiral Nelson used his seat in the Lords to perpetuate tyranny, serial rape and exploitation" and that he was on the wrong side of the moral trend led by William Wilberforce that would end slavery (or at least the Atlantic slave trade). Exploiting the events in Charlottesville, Hirsch believes Nelson's Column also celebrates the era of slavery and made her comments to provoke debate and shake Britain from its "intellectual laziness". She was taken aback by the backlash which she described as "defensive and hostile".

Her article shivered my timbers too! While I disagree entirely with her analysis of Nelson as a proactive supporter of slavery I believe we must be honest. Nelson did support the Atlantic slave trade. It is an uncomfortable fact that goes against every other aspect of his humanity. I realised that this Dispatch had to stand back and seek to explore the various issues involved because this is about much more than the loaded phrase 'white supremacist' attitudes. The 1805 Club exists to preserve monuments and memorials, including those to Nelson. By honouring Nelson and his kind are we therefore also white supremacists?

There are two issues to explore. Firstly, does Nelson deserve the contempt poured on him and secondly, when (if ever) is it appropriate to remove statues from our streets, squares and parks erected to people whose past glories become an embarrassment to groups and communities today? Both issues raise the vital importance of factual accuracy over received wisdom as a starting point - the watchword of any good historian. This engages with the very nature of memory itself and the *raison d'être* of The 1805 Club.

When the city of Charlottesville voted to remove the statue of General Robert E Lee, who commanded the Confederate Army of North Virginia, the ensuing fury saw KKK, white supremacists and neo-Nazis in the streets, violent clashes with counter demonstrators, the death of one young woman

and the condemnation of President Donald Trump for his failure to condemn the acts of the far-right groups. Meanwhile, in Russia it is the 80th anniversary of the Great Terror, the purges in which Joseph Stalin killed and enslaved millions, and yet new statues to him are springing up across the country, led by President Vladimir Putin's admiration for the dictator's role in crushing the Nazis.

These examples pose the question: Are statues more about our present than our past? Is the statue of Lee in Charlottesville (or Nelson in Trafalgar Square) a symbol of oppression to be torn down or an historic monument to be preserved?

The Lee statue is not a simple case because it was erected in 1928, such a long time after the Civil War but at a time when other statues to white people were also appearing in many other public places in the Southern states; interpreted by the black community as symbols of slavery and white dominance, which to this day are still perceived as marginalising the descendants of slaves.

Once we approach the subject from the principal of 'let us eradicate those things from the past that are morally wrong and unacceptable today' we cannot stop with Confederate statues, as Hirsch demonstrates. We have to put everything on the table, which will inevitably topple countless 'fallen idols'. The big problem here is that this then creates an artificial sense of what the past was. Trying to cleanse it of the perceived things that make no sense morally today creates a version of the past that simply isn't real.

Consider the statues in Parliament Square. On one hand there is Winston Churchill and Jan Smuts, architects of Empire; with for many, unpleasant attitudes to race. On the other hand there is Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Ghandi, the latter respected and admired by both Churchill and Smuts. History is evolutionary and by displaying all of the statues we have a full history of Empire for people to read.

Close by in the precincts of the Houses of Parliament, there is the imposing statue of Oliver Cromwell, a man regarded by many as a tyrant, a war criminal because of the Drogheda genocide, and a man who forcibly shut down Parliament for 11 years. The parliamentary debate in 1895 about erecting this statue nearly brought down the Government. Yet it is part of British identity that Cromwell's greatest legacy was the road to parliamentary democracy, and that's why he is there.

Taking down any of these statues would not be about correcting history as much as telling a particular kind of history.

There is probably not a single person to whom a statue has been erected who can be described as being squeaky clean in their lifetime, let alone how they may appear through the lens of contemporary values.

Does Nelson deserve the condemnation directed at him? Did he actively perpetuate "tyranny, serial rape and exploitation"?

It is a fact that his anti-abolitionist views were based on the old political beliefs of colonialism with which he had been imbued from an early age. His first voyage was to the West Indies and the islands, including Jamaica, played a fundamental part in his career development, not least when he had command of the West Indies station between 1784-87. This introduced him to planters, the plantation system based on slaves and confirmed the vital strategic and economic importance of the islands to Britain. This is reflected as late as May 1805 when he left his Mediterranean station to chase Admirals Villeneuve and Gravina across the Atlantic to safeguard these sugar islands, since the wealth they generated

was one of the economic foundations of the war effort. Michael Duffy describes them as 'a precarious moneybox'. Throughout Nelson's life sugar had today's equivalence of oil. It was the lifeblood of the national enterprise. The great majority in both Houses of Parliament and the King himself put their importance and protection above everything; save a direct invasion of England. George III wrote, 'Our islands must be defended even at the risk of an invasion of this island. If we lose our sugar islands it will be impossible to raise money to continue.'

Being a patriot, obedient to his King and country and serving a lifetime in the Royal Navy, an institution inextricably bound up with the West Indies, it is hardly surprising that he put his duty first. Nevertheless, a letter published two years after his death reveals the rare and untypical expression of Nelson's temperament and political opinion and it damns him to this very day, giving apparent substance to the views expressed by Hirsch. He wrote the letter on 10 June 1805 to Simon Taylor, a substantial slave owner whom he had known for 30 years and it is worth quoting it in full as is done so in this issue. He wrote it privately and not for the wider world. Taylor published it in 1807 to oppose the Anti-Slavery Bill. This is important. Nelson was not openly or publicly standing up in support of slavery as Hirsch implies. The key sentence is:

"...I have ever been and shall die a firm friend to our colonial system. I was bred as you know in the good old school, and taught to appreciate the value of our West India possessions, and neither in the field nor in the senate, shall their interest be infringed while I have an arm to fight in their defence or a tongue to launch my voice against the damnable and cursed doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies..."

Taken on face value Nelson seems to have condemned himself. Yet this is in sharp contrast to his genuine humanitarian views and actions practiced throughout his life, as well as being contrary to the inspiration and beliefs he gained from his strong Christian faith.

How far the letter represents his real views is uncertain. Might there be mediating circumstances? Five things come to mind. Firstly, he was writing at a time when he was being accused of risking the safety of the British West Indies and needed to emphasise the importance he attached to their protection.

Secondly, William Wilberforce was widely seen by those with political power and wealth as a threat to the status quo and Britain's place in the world. They feared that his ambitions would lead to the collapse of prosperity and the social order. The threat of revolution was ever present and the abolition of the slave trade was regarded as a possible a pathway to it. Nelson, a political conservative, was ruthless in the face of any agitation or change that threatened the peace and order of the state and the Royal Navy's ability to protect it. His priority was to serve his King and country.

Thirdly, it is possible that he saw hypocrisy in Wilberforce as well as his allies. Wilberforce was a staunch ally of William Pitt, the prime minister, and supported him when political necessity forced Pitt to suspend Habeas Corpus. Pitt had, after all, said, 'Necessity is the plea for the infringement of human freedom. It is the argument of tyrants; it is the creed of slaves'. Inevitably these words were hurled back at him and this taints Wilberforce with the charge of hypocrisy for criticising the slave trade while content to see his own countrymen thrown into prison without charge. Moreover, Nelson was well aware that slavery was not restricted to black Africans, having witnessed how the Barbary corsairs carried away hundreds of thousands of Europe-

ans into slavery in North Africa. By focusing on one side of the despicable trade Wilberforce was being hypocritical. Nelson would have also been aware of Wilberforce's early life as a rake and hedonist before he became an Evangelical Christian, and subsequently sanctimonious and priggish, espousing one good cause after another as he sought to improve society.

Fourthly, no matter how repugnant it seems to us today slavery in the 18th century was considered the norm, not only in the colonies but also in England where many homes boasted black or child servants. Nelson's personal experience was based on his plentiful time in the West Indies. If, as is likely, he only encountered household and freed slaves he may have concluded that they were well-treated and indeed better off than the agricultural workers in Norfolk for whom he did campaign in the Lords.

Finally, Nelson never used his seat in the Lords to speak in support of slavery. There is not a single shred of evidence that he considered white people superior to black people and in his personal dealings on land and at sea the evidence shows he treated all equally. In fact, he fought hard for the rights of individual black men who gave him good service. Maybe he could be considered naïve but it is more likely that he was being pragmatic. He was certainly no white supremacist!

Notwithstanding any of this Nelson still finds himself on the wrong side of history whereas Wilberforce's aims are without question noble. It is ironic that it was Nelson's great victory at Trafalgar which helped provide the context for the end of the Atlantic slave trade in the British Empire, just two years after his death! If he had lived I believe he would have vigorously enforced the new anti-slavery law. After all it was his duty!

If we are to respond justly to the difficult issues raised by contemporary events and prevailing cultural and moral values it must, I believe, be through a proper legal process and not a knee-jerk response that is driven by a mob or protest interest group. Fundamentally, everyone needs to be honest about our shared past. Rather than topple public statues we should let them stand and shift the emphasis to better educating the general public in order to interpret them in perspective and context. Compromise solutions, such as removing them to private spaces, like museums, should be vigorously resisted!

I wonder if we have heard the last of this? Probably not. Cities from California to Maryland are rushing to topple monuments honouring other Confederate figures. I have just read that the statue to Christopher Columbus in New York may be removed because he treated native Americans poorly. (What about treatment by modern Americans?) And now news from Australia that the inscription on the statue to Captain James Cook in Hyde Park, Sydney should be changed because it ignores indigenous Australians (why not say Aborigines?!).

May I leave you to ruminate on these complex issues with another recent historical event, since repeated in Syria: The destruction in 2001 of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Buddhas of Bamiyan in central Afghanistan - because they were declared by the Taliban to be idols.

With all good wishes, yours aye,

