

A You went to Liverpool University, didn't you?

B Yes, a long time ago.

A Did you see that a petition's been launched to rename Liverpool University's Roscoe and Gladstone halls of residence?

B No, I hadn't heard about that. Why do they want to change the names? After all, William Gladstone was prime minister of Great Britain four times between 1868 and 1894.

A According to the student who launched the petition, Gladstone's support for slavery makes him unacceptable. He fought for reparations for slave traders like his father during the abolition of the trade...

B But I've read that Gladstone's pragmatic and consensual policy on slavery had some advantages and led to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire a generation earlier than in the US, and without the massive loss of life that the American Civil War occasioned. He's consistently ranked as one of Britain's greatest prime ministers. This whole revisionist stance on history is going too far. It reminds me of the campaign to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oxford University a couple of years ago.

A Yes, well, Oriel College did eventually decide not to remove the statue. But why should we continue to celebrate these historical figures if they don't deserve to be memorialised with statues, plaques, and buildings? After all, Rhodes was a nineteenth-century imperialist who annexed vast areas of land in South Africa and many describe him as the architect of apartheid.

B But we can't pretend that those people didn't exist. The trouble is that almost every person of that era held opinions which were commonplace at the time but are at odds with modern thinking. Taken to its extreme, this approach would lead to the eradication of almost every building and statue commemorating notable figures of the past, including the Albert Memorial and Nelson's Column.

A I'm not saying we should go that far, but I do think that we need to be made aware of what some of these historical figures actually stood for. Many of the people commemorated by these statues were responsible for untold death and destruction.

B True, but removing statues may well hamper our understanding of history. History can't be unwritten, or hidden away, or erased when we change our minds. The continuing presence of these historical artefacts is an important reminder of the complexity of history. And there's no reason why the current positive plaques on statues such as Gladstone's should not be replaced with one that makes clear his position on the abolition of the slave trade, though that won't be easy as his stance evolved over the years. At least this could spark off a debate that should be historically informed. If you ask me, it's better on the whole to keep the statues but to recontextualize them.

A That's easier said than done, especially when there are important cultural and political issues involved. You only have to look at what's been happening in the US.

B You mean the battle over Confederate statues?

A Yes. Recent decisions by local governments to remove those memorials have triggered a backlash from a vocal group of Americans who see their removal as an attempt to subvert US history and southern culture. Defenders of Confederate symbols say they're not meant to memorialise slavery, which, of course, the South fought to preserve. They say that the war was fought for states' rights and against the federal system, and that symbols such as the Confederate flag commemorate the region's history and culture. Most historians do agree though that it was about slavery. Racial minorities, especially black Americans, feel that the presence of such symbols in public places is offensive.

B Yes, but wouldn't removing them serve simply to whitewash history? How can future generations learn if we're going to erase history? For once, I agree with President Trump, who said it will only be a matter of time before liberal activists suggest removing monuments to Thomas Jefferson or George Washington, because they owned slaves.

A Look, the historical record is actually pretty clear: the Confederacy was about white supremacy, and so are the monuments dedicated to it. Much of America is now coming to terms with that legacy, and if that involves getting rid of some old statues, isn't that a small price to pay?

Outline

A petition has been launched to rename Liverpool University's Roscoe and Gladstone halls of residence. William Gladstone, four times prime minister of Great Britain, is considered unacceptable because of his support for slavery; he fought for reparations for slave traders during the abolition of the trade, but his pragmatic and consensual policy on slavery is said to have led to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire a generation earlier than in the US. Should these historical figures continue to be memorialised with statues, plaques, and buildings if they don't deserve to be? As removing statues may hamper our understanding of history, it is better to keep them but recontextualize them. The recent decisions by local governments in the US to remove Confederate statues are also mentioned.

Questions

1. When is it right to remove a statue?
2. Why are there so many statues in public spaces?
3. Who would you like to commemorate with a statue and why?
4. What can we learn from history?