Blue Plaques in London Matter

by Michael Curtis

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. Or is the maxim of William Faulkner. "the past is never dead, it is never even past," more pertinent today? Memory and history conjure up the past. Three polemical questions can be raised: what is important in the past; what information or symbolic objects are relevant to understand an active role of the past in the present; and what are the values of those who erected and those who want to destroy monuments of the past?

Monuments and images are accepted as portraits of the past, but does the breaking of images, the toppling or destruction of statues and monuments, articulate the values of the present? The questions are compelling in this discussion of claims about the part. Does the presence of these material artifacts spark ideas and action concerning power, race, gender, culture? Is history being erased by the toppling of these artifacts? If acts of the past are whitewashed, does this mean that racism permeates institutions and entire societies?

Wokery barbarians are at the gates, but fortunately so are their anti-wokery opponents. A number of issuers are worth considering. Countless protests have informed the world that

Black Lives Matter. It is encouraging to know that Blue Plaques matter and that none are presently at risk of being torn down. English Heritage, EH, a charity institution governed by a board of trustees, and a management team, is responsible for more than 400 historic monuments and places. This includes the concern with plaques formerly dealt with by the London County Council and the Greater London Council. EH took over the plaque scheme in 1986. It confirmed that no blue plaque had been taken down or toppled. figures. However, it was beginning to review what may be considered "problematic," figures. Its objective is to increase the diversity of the plaques in London: it is worried that plaques commemorate figures whose actions in the past now in 2022 appear painful. The EH specially addresses the lack of women and BAME (Black, Asian, Minority ethnic) persons as well as plaques that commemorate the problematic figures. At present, only 14% of plaques celebrate women.

There are 900 plaques across London. Recipients must have died at least 20 years before being nominated. The plaque registers the relationship between a person and a place, a surviving building that is associated with particular men or women who lived or worked there. The first plaque erected after EH took over in 1986 was that of the painter Oskar Kokoschka.

Some recipients are surprising and unusual ; Luke Howard, namer of clouds; Peter Kropotkin anarchist; Willy Clarkson, theater wigmaker. The recent figures have included Arsenal football manager Herbert Chapman; Maud McCarthy , nurse in World War I; Alan Turing; and Jimi Hendrix, coincidentally next door to home of Handel. The original plaque to Karl Marx was vandalized and taken down. Another to him was later put up. Some individuals have more than one plaque; Churchill. Palmerston, Thackeray.

The most recent development, one that is controversial, concerns Sir Richard Arkwright 1732-1792, whose plaque is at Adam Street, central London. Arkwright, industrialist and

inventor, developed a machine that increased the process before spinning, and frames that sped up the process of turning cotton fiber into workable yarn. He used a disciplined working day of 13 hour shifts and mechanized manufacturing that led him to be nicknamed “father of the factory system.” The problem for the present is that the factory system at the time made use of child labor, a large part of Arkwright’s workforce.

English Heritage is introducing two changes: first, it is increasing the diversity of the plaques in London; secondly, it will now provide contextual information about why the plaques are there so that people can better understand them. It borders on the edge of wokery, but so far it is not ideological.

In more controversial action, Imperial College, London, formerly the Royal College of Science, is examining its links with its founding father, the 19th century biologist Thomas Huxley, 1825-1895, now that a group has been set up to monitor BLM protests calling for the removal of his bust and that his name on the College building named in his honor be renamed.

The group argued that in an essay Huxley expressed the racial hierarchy of intelligence , and that he espoused a belief system of scientific racism that fed the ideology of eugenics. The group concluded that Huxley, an advocate of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, might be called a racist.

However, in this case wokery was opposed. A letter from 39 leading scientists, including Richard Dawkins and Nobel Laureate Paul Nurse, objected to this characterization of Huxley and asked Imperial College to allow his name to stay on its walls. They stated that all men and women should be judged on their merits and they all remained in his debt for his scientific accomplishments. Huxley did believe in a hierarchy of races, but he became wary of racial stereotypes as he grew older. These scientists held that Huxley was an ardent

abolitionist who opposed the pro-slavery scientific racism of his day, that he welcomed the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865. He reformed London schools and was a principal of a working men's college. The scientists wrote that Huxley's early belief in a hierarchy of races "is not ours," but his scientific accomplishments, his civic-mindedness, and his reforming zeal in British science and education mean he should remain honored.

A third example of anti-wokery is increasing criticism of the new policy of the British National Trust which is continuing its review of the links between 93 of the properties, houses, gardens, parklands. It manages colonialism and heralds the fact it is uncovering history every day by "decolonizing" the history of Britain. It is evident that British colonialism was important for British economic, social, political, and cultural life. Though the NT claims it is not making judgements of the past, and that it is examining the true complexity of the role, sometimes uncomfortable, that Britons have played in global history since the 16th century or even earlier, it is concentrating on its holdings of goods and products of the slave trade and enslaved labor and on the East India Company that dominated trade between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, and the legacies of colonialism in the making of modern Britain.

The NT has jumped on the BLM bandwagon in stressing the factual evidence, positive and negative, of British colonialism, though it does admit that no one alive today is responsible for the inequities of the past.

However, criticism has increased of the argument that this NT policy is the way to raise awareness about what NT calls the complexity of history in relation to place. The trust's curatorial director has stated that the trust was not making judgments about the past, but that is exactly what it is doing. The country retreat, Chartwell, home of Winston

Churchill, is being examined, and the report focuses on the facts he was minister for the colonies in 1921-1922, and prime minister during the devastating Bengal famine of 1943. Other events in 1943 are unmentioned. In connection with this, Leicester University is providing lectures on British imperial history in its4 year project curriculum including subjects such as colonial links that produced sugar wealth, East India Company connections, black servants, Indian loot, Francis Drake and other circumnavigators, colonial business interests, holders of colonial office, Chinese wallpaper, Victorian plant hunters, and imperial interior design. Leicester had already changed offerings in its English department to focus on race and gender As a result, some of the faculty resigned at the "decolonization" process of dropping Chaucer and Beowulf, the longest epic poem in old English.

Criticism has mounted against the actions of NT and Leicester University for its cancel culture activities and its elimination of texts regarded as fundamental to English literature.

A question. An event is to take place in Jesus Chapel, Cambridge next month, It is to decide on whether to remove from the chapel a memorial to a major benefactor, Tobias Rustat, courtier to Charles II and creator of s fund to buy books for Cambridge University library. He was a businessman who had invested in the Royal Africa Company which traded in slaves. How would you vote?