Populism, Nationalism and the Past. An English story of History in the Present

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‘Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.’ These much-quoted words were crafted by the poet and novelist Ben Okri in the *Birds of Heaven*(1996) (Grosvenor et al 2002:21). History is essentially about stories and this article is about a set of disparate but interconnected stories in circulation in the United Kingdom during the Covid-19 pandemic which offered a particular view of the past in the present. It is a view of the past which has been promoted by a right-wing government to manufacture a culture war for political purposes. It is a culture war which is not about dialogue, constructive deliberation, negotiation, or compromise, but one concerned with determining which stories we should live by as individuals and as a nation. It is a culture war which in its execution displays all the hallmarks of populist politics. It is a culture war which seeks to change politics .

Having offered a prologue let us turn to three storylines in an ‘English story of History in the Present’: the toppling of Edward Colston, the ‘baying mob’ and the Voices of Common Sense.

Storyline One: The toppling of Edward Colston

On Sunday 7 June 2020, the statue of Edward Colston was pulled from its plinth and rolled into Bristol harbour during a Black Lives Matter demonstration. The statue had been erected in 1895 to celebrate and remind Bristolians of Colston’s philanthropic work in the city. The end of the nineteenth century was a period of great pride in Britain’s imperial journey, a time when racist theories and practices shaped the British Empire and there was little concern over how Colston had made his fortune. Colston (1636-1721), a Conservative MP, was director of the Royal African Company and had made his fortune as a merchant in the Atlantic slave trade. The wrapping of the statue in chains and throwing it into the harbour which once was the site from which his slave ships had set sail marked a local contemporary reckoning with the realities of Empire and colonialism. It’s presence had generated a long history of debate in the city, but the Black Lives Matter

movement had brought a new urgency and a desire for action. Five days later Oliver Dowden, the UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport [DCMS], wrote to Conservative MPs: ‘As Conservatives … we should not support or indulge those who break the law, or attack the police, or desecrate public monuments.’ In late June he sent a letter to the Trustees of the Museum of Home in Hackney, East London, regarding a public consultation considering the relocation from the entrance of the museum of a statue of Robert Geffrye, a slave merchant. The organisation had recently changed its name from that of the Geffrye Museum. He told Trustees ‘… we cannot pretend to have a different history.’ Three months later a third letter was dispatched to national museums and major arts and heritage funding bodies stating that the government did not support the ‘removal of statues or other similar objects.’ It warned that as public funded organisations they ‘should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics,’ but rather act with ‘impartiality.’ The letter ended with a veiled threat that failure to comply could put government funding of the sector at risk. (Hicks, 2020). Early in 2021 the same organisations were invited to a virtual meeting with Dowden to discuss how they should implement the government’s ‘retain and explain’ approach regarding statues and monuments with slavery and colonial links to Britain’s past. Prior to the meeting right wing media were briefed that Dowden believed that the sector ‘must defend our culture and history from the noisy minority of activists constantly trying to do Britain down’ (Museums Association, 2021; Massing, 2021).

Storyline Two: The ‘baying mob’

Not long after the toppling of Colston another Black Lives Matter demonstration was planned for London and statues, including that of the wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill, were boarded up before the event. Boris Johnson employed Twitter to criticise protestors calling for memorials to slavery and racism to be removed and declared ‘the only responsible course of action’ was to stay away from the protests which he claimed had been ‘hijacked by extremists intent on violence’. Johnson’s intervention can be read as a response to pressure within the Conservative party to take a tougher line against protesters, with one MP tweeting ‘This attack on our history, our culture [is] increasingly aggravating my constituents’ (Stewart et al, 2020). In the event it was far right protestors who, while claiming to ‘protect our statues,’ desecrated the Cenotaph by performing Nazi salutes. The status of statues remained a populist theme as the UK entered 2021 with Robert Jenrick, the Conservative Secretary of State for Housing and Communities, penning a comment piece for the right-wing *Sunday Telegraph*

newspaper. He had noticed ‘at the hand of the flash mob, or by the decree of a “cultural committee” of town hall militants and woke worthies’ an attempt to set a ‘single, often negative narrative’ which sought ‘to erase part of the nation’s history,’ and consequently intended to propose amendments to laws to protect statues, monuments and other memorials. There was, he claimed, ‘a revisionist purge’ and the ‘mindless’ destroyers of heritage included Labour Councillors who were set on changing the street names from those associated with slavery and colonialism. He wrote:

We live in a country that believes in the rule of law, but when it comes to protecting our heritage, due process has been overridden. That can’t be right. … What has stood for generations should be considered thoughtfully, not removed on a whim or at the behest of a baying mob (Jenrick, 2021).

The new law will allow any disgruntled resident or racist to appeal directly to the Department of Housing and Communities over proposed changes with the minister having the power to overturn decisions locally made by heritage organisations or local councils.

Storyline Three: The Voices of Common Sense

1895 the same year that witnessed the erection of Colston’s statue in Bristol was also marked by the establishment of The National Trust as a charitable body to ‘ promote the permanent preservation for the benefit of the Nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest.’ In 2020 the Trust produced an interim report on the connections between colonialism and historic slavery and properties in its care. The report documented how proceeds from British colonialism and the slave economy funded 93 historic places and detailed associated colonial associations:

Those histories are deeply interwoven into the material fabric of the British Isles; a significant number of the collections, houses, gardens and parklands in our care were created or remodelled as expressions of the taste and wealth, as well as power and privilege, that derived from colonial connections and in some cases from the trade in enslaved people. We believe that only by honestly and openly acknowledging and sharing those stories can we do justice to the true complexity of

past, present and future, and the sometimes-uncomfortable role that Britain, and Britons, have played in global history since the sixteenth century or even earlier (Huxtable, 2020: 5).

The report also documented links between Trust properties and the abolition of slavery and campaigns against colonial oppression. Amongst reappraised properties was Chartwell, the family home of Winston Churchill. For the *Common Sense Group*, a newly formed collective of 59 Conservative MPs and seven members of the House of Lords, the report was beyond the pale as it 'tarnished one of Britain's greatest sons, Winston Churchill, by linking his family home with slavery and colonialism.' The Group accordingly wrote to the Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden requesting that he review the funding of the Trust. In a separate letter to the right-wing *Daily Telegraph* newspaper the Group explained their origins and mission. It was formed to 'speak for the silent majority of voters' who were tired of 'being patronised by elitist bourgeois liberals' whenever issues such as immigration or law and order were raised. The core of their mission was 'to ensure' that those 'institutional custodians of history and heritage' tasked with 'safeguarding and celebrating British values' were not 'coloured by cultural Marxist dogma, colloquially known as the "woke agenda."' For the *Common Sense Group*, 'History must neither be sanitised nor rewritten to suit "snowflake" preoccupations,' and a 'clique of powerful, privileged liberals must not be allowed to rewrite our history in their image.' (Hayes et al, 2020). The letter was only the opening assault on the National Trust's report. Other Conservative MPs, right wing historians and newspaper columnists joined in accusing the Trust of exceeding its statutory remit by engaging in politics and of being overtaken by Black Lives Matter activists. The use of word 'histories' in the report, as opposed to 'history', was according to one commentator 'an alert' that like the use of 'diversity' and 'multiple narratives' in the text suggested plurality but really meant imposed 'uniformity.' The report was not a handbook but 'a woke …manifesto,' a 're-presentation and interpretation project' designed 'to make people ashamed of being British' (Moore,2020). Professor Corinne Fowler, one of the lead editors of the report, was singled out and trolled online, her character maligned, and her academic reputation questioned. It was reported that the DCMS was minded to try and bar Fowler's access to future research funding and this led to a request for clarification by the Royal Historical Society stating that Britain has a tradition of arm's length funding of education, culture and heritage and 'If anyone is being too "political" here, it is politicians who violate the arms-length principle by seeking to dictate what research our heritage bodies can and cannot support'

(Griffin et al, 2021).

The Story of the English Culture War of 2020-21

The toppling of Edward Colston, the 'baying mob', and the Voices of Common Sense each represent an element, a connected element to a larger story in British politics, a divisive and ongoing populist 'culture war' in the arts, museums, and heritage sector. This war has essentially been an English one, with little negative engagement from the UK's devolved governments. [1] Many other stories can be added to this culture war: accusations of 'character assassination' at a panel discussion on 'The Racial Consequences of Mr Churchill' organised at Churchill College, Cambridge where speakers were subjected to hate mail, racist slurs, and threat; English schools told not to use anti-capitalist material in teaching; concerns over the National Maritime Museum decision to review Nelson's' heroic status'; Kew Gardens' ten year manifesto to tackle the biodiversity crisis and to 'decolonise' the gardens' collections by addressing 'exploitative and racist legacies' and being described by the leader of the Common Sense Group as 'preposterous posturing by people who are so out of touch with the sentiment of Patriotic Britain'; calls to fly the Union Jack flag at every single school and public building as 'a proud reminder of our history' and for children to sing the national anthem every day in school assembly; the formation of a new group of Conservative MPs, *Conservatives Against Racism for Equality*(Carfe) which will promote a new conservative 'narrative' on race relations and includes Ann Hart, MP for Hastings and Rye who was investigated by the party in 2020 for alleged racism; and the row over *Rule Britannia!* and *Land of Hope and Glory* being removed from the Last Night of the Proms in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests and of the songs strong association with imperialism with Boris Johnson exclaiming 'I think it's time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions, and about our culture, and we stopped this general fight of self-discrimination and wetness' (Gopal, 2021; Busby, 2020; Parveen, 2021; Waterson, 2020; Pogrund, 2021).

But where has all this anger and passion come from? How do we make sense of the idea of 'our' culture and 'our' history being under threat, and of being stolen by others? If we unpick and analyse all of the different elements in these separate but connected stories that make up the present culture war, common threads can be identified. There is a 'cacophony' of voices belittling values and traditions and a sense of moral indignation that the views and voices of 'ordinary' people, who naturally intuit what is right, are being challenged and consensus undermined. The

legitimacy of patriotism and of national heroes is being questioned while emotional language circulates around the centrality of ancestry and place. National history is being effaced and there is an omnipresent ‘noise’ in the right-wing press that history is being rewritten without consent. All these threads are characteristics of right-wing populism (Applebaum, 2020; Burleigh, 2021) and in the context of the current culture war they are ‘the latest page in the populist playbook’ (Pearson, 2020). It is a culture war which has been manufactured for political ends, and it is a war which cannot be separated from the Brexit campaign.

Brexit and ‘restorative nostalgia’

For Boris Johnson Brexit:

> was a chance for the British people to be the heroes of Europe and to act as a voice of moderation and common sense, and to stop something getting in my view out of control … It is time for someone – it’s almost always the British in European history – to say, “We think a different approach is called for” (Ross, 2016).

Johnson promoted the idea of the UK being special and the Brexit campaign certainly revived the idea of English exceptionalism and projected into the future the establishment of the ‘Anglosphere’ and the ‘English Speaking Peoples’ as ‘a putative base for Global Britain’ (Reynolds, 2019: 189). Ann Applebaum in *Twilight of Democracy. The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends*(2020) described the emergence in the UK of a turn towards ‘restorative nostalgia.’ Britain was the only European country that had a ‘real claim to victory in the Second World War’, the country ‘was never invaded, never surrendered, the country that chose the right side from the beginning,’ but the nation had been undermined. It has moved from a state of order to a state of disorder. Being part of the European Union was the embodiment of everything that had gone wrong, it had perverted the course of history and the nation had been reduced to a shadow of its former self. The Brexit campaign was a project about ‘truth’ and an upsurge in national consciousness was needed. Brexit offered the opportunity to regain, in Johnson’s words, ‘the dynamism of those bearded Victorians’ [Applebaum, 2020: 65, 75, 82-83, 93). These ‘bearded Victorians’ were also the agents of empire. At the end of the nineteenth century, it was estimated that the British Empire covered a quarter of the world’s land and held a fifth of the world’s population. The late Victorians believed their success was due to their innate ability and superiority. As the arch imperialist Cecil Rhodes [2],

who was instrumental in the annexation for empire of large swathes of land in Southern Africa, wrote ‘We are the first race in the world … with the highest ideals of decency and justice and liberty and peace, and the more we inhabit, the better it is for the human race’ (Stead, 1902:58). Such ideas afforded a profound emotional legitimacy to the nation and provided individuals with a sense of solidarity and descent from and belonging to, a collective identity that was unique. As decolonisation gathered pace the empire may have become the past but it did not cease to have a role in the national consciousness and public memory. This collective identity and its associated sense of exceptionalism was reflected in a 2016 study which recorded 43% of Britons believed that the British Empire was a good thing, and 44% considered Britain’s colonial past a source of pride. A second study in 2020 showed that Britons were more likely than other former colonial powers (France, Germany, Japan) to say that they would like their country to still have an empire (Stone, 2016; Gregory, 2020).

The rise of traditionalism, xenophobia and popular nationalism during the Brexit campaign was paralleled by a sustained assault on the concept of multiculturalism, to the extent that it led one commentator to conclude that it is now ‘widely scorned and trivialized’ and ‘excluded from serious analysis and critical conversation’ and that ‘debate has been succeeded by a much more diffuse consideration of social and cultural diversity’ (Grosvenor, 2019: 150). The Brexit debate was toxic with its inflammatory rhetoric and the shameless xenophobia of the Leave campaign. It was also characterised by a series of culture war skirmishes with remainers, the universities, the legal system, the BBC, and the larger cities which both mobilised and united conservative Britons. Debates around patriotism, the nation and social cohesion were shaped by Brexit and had traction amongst the electorate in the 2019 parliamentary election and delivered a substantial majority for the Conservative party. The Brexiteers had won. The government was now led by one of their own.

Brexit done, what need then for another culture war in 2020? Jonathan Parry has argued that the Conservative project ‘has always been a project for governing – and saving – the country.’ The Conservative idea of party ‘has always incorporated the idea of managing the nation.’ Moreover, the Conservative party never doubts its right to be in government. It presumes that it is the natural party of government. Conservative rule is the country’s default position. Nevertheless, managing the nation for the future involves giving reassurance to its core support that the people in charge ‘of their party and country are people with whose values they can feel

secure, and who can take the responsibility of national leadership'. With Brexit the choice was made to 'prioritise sovereignty and distinctiveness' over trade benefits. Reassurance therefore required a narrative which explained 'the policy needs of the moment while at the same time flattering the political traditions and myths endorsed by their support bases' (Parry, 2021). It is a narrative which requires constant renewal and the new culture war proved an effective tool for offering reassurance as it employed a distancing between 'us' and 'them,' and deployed a discourse which was relational and could readily be mobilised through a partisan media.

It should be acknowledged that the current culture war has also had the added benefit of helping to divert attention from the political failures of Johnson's government in tackling the Covid-19 pandemic. Failings is probably too gentle a description. The government handling of the crisis has been criminal in its consequences. It includes Johnson's own failure as a leader and his dithering, delaying and inability to make unpopular decisions, including introducing lockdowns and imposing border controls and quarantining arrangements. Johnson's government ignored face mask advice for too long, the promised 'world class' track and trace system has proved to be both ineffective and wasteful, data has been poorly managed and the monitoring of procurement contracts negligent. Neglect has also characterised government attempts to protect those in social care, and there has been a failure to learn from the experiences of other countries. All these failings combined with an over centralised system have resulted in the UK having a coronavirus death toll that remains the highest in Europe [3], alongside the deepest economic slump in the G7. Ramping up the culture war at a time of trauma and uncertainty and presenting a comforting and idealised vision of the past offered the public a sense of stability and reassurance, a reminder of the strength of the British spirit and values in times of adversity.

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How does history and an understanding of the past enter the public domain? How is a consensus of understanding developed and maintained? How does one reading of the past come to dominate over others? These are central questions for trying to understand the story presented here, of an English story of History in the Present. Immanuel Wallerstein's essay on the construction of 'peoplehood' is a useful starting point. He began by asking the question, 'why does one want or need a past,

an “identity.”’ He concluded that

‘pastness’ is central to and inherent in the ‘concept of peoplehood.’ Pastness, is a mode by which persons are persuaded to act in the present in ways they might not otherwise act. Pastness is a tool persons use against each other. It is a central element in the socialisation of individuals, in the maintenance of group solidarity … pastness is by definition an assertion of the constant past.’

Pastness is produced and reproduced through discourse (Wallerstein,1991 : 78). Political leaders, as Reynolds observes, ‘want a clear, simple and uplifting version of history to inspire visions of the future’, and as argued above to also reassure their electoral base (Reynolds, 2019: 249). However, when history waves a national flag, and discourse about ‘pastness’ is framed through a nationalist lens, the story told is always partisan. The partisan story which dominated the Brexit campaign and remains in circulation in post-Brexit Britain is one where in the telling heritage has overwhelmed history. To make sense of how heritage became a substitute for history and to grasp the powerful hold it has in the culture wars we need to understand the difference between heritage and history as approaches to the past.

Symbols, monuments, memorials, old buildings and exhibitable objects represent the ‘tangible past’ in the present. They are a nation’s sensory heritage and are inherited by the generations that follow. They belong to ‘us’ and represent continuity in the face of change in an unstable world. They remind us of who we are. Stories are told about them and they become part of the stories that nations tell about themselves. Stories that are preserved, treasured, and reproduced through time. Heritage, in this sense, offers ‘people’ a promise of certainty, of the familiar and of belonging. It is through heritage that the past ‘achieves a public presence.’ It occupies the public stage as ‘ours,’ not just the possession and right of a few’ (Wright, 2009:131-32). History, as opposed to heritage, is a discipline with its own rules and procedures. The word ‘history’ comes from the Greek word *istoreo*, meaning ‘to inquire.’ It follows that History as a discipline is about asking questions. It is about asking questions of evidence from the past and interpreting what that evidence reveals about the past. ‘History,’ as the historian J. H. Plumb wrote, is ‘an intellectual process’ which attempts ‘to cleanse the story of mankind’ from ‘deceiving visions of a purposeful past’ (Plumb, 1969: 12, 17). David Lowenthal’s dichotomous definition of the two terms offers perhaps the most concise summary. History, according to Lowenthal, is universally accessible and testable. Heritage is

‘tribal, exclusive, patriotic, redemptive, or self-aggrandizing;’ it counts ‘not on checkable fact but credulous allegiance’ (Lowenthal, 1996: 120-21).

Heritage and History so defined are at the centre of the present culture war and present competing visions of the past, the present and the future. In the culture war stories shared in this essay ‘history’ has been used instrumentally. It is a history of stories which feed national pride and public memory, it is a history of reverence and a repository of great lives, great deeds, and sacrifice all of which have been memorialised. The following three extracts serve both as a reminder of the storylines shared above and as evidence of the accuracy of Lowenthal’s definition of heritage. The first two are from a parliamentary debate in early November 2020 and the latter from an interview a few weeks later in a local newspaper:

… Boadicea, Alfred the Great, Richard the Lionheart, the Black Prince, Henry V, Francis Drake, Prince Rupert, Marlborough, Wolfe, Nelson, Moore, Wellington, Gordon and Montgomery, among others. These are great heroes and we should celebrate them … We should be proud of our history … we have had an avalanche of miserable, Britain-hating nonsense about our history and our culture filling the airwaves in recent months … Left-wing troublemakers are determined to ignore our history and smear our past heroes … Her Majesty’s Government are clear about our history and our culture: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is a fantastic nation with a first-class history… we should never bow to the activists who want to scrub our history bare and start from year zero. We must retain and explain all aspects of our noble island’s story for the benefit of future generations.

Extract 1: Jacob Rees-Mogg [4](*Hansard*, vol 638, 12 November).

Britain’s heritage is under attack, ironically from those missioned to be the guardians of it …Can we have a debate on how these charitable organisations’ purpose is being perverted by political posturing, as they all seem to be in the thrall of the militant Black Lives Matter movement? Mr Deputy Speaker, defending our history and heritage is our era’s battle of Britain.

Extract 2: Sir John Hayes (Hansard, vol 638, 12 November).

History is full of all kinds of good and bad things but each of us is a product of our history and we can’t sanitise or rewrite it …The effects are potentially devastating

… if children cease to learn about these great heroes like Churchill and Nelson, how robbed they would be of the prestige that gives people a sense of purpose and pride in their heritage.

Every country's history is littered with great and good things, as well as less good things. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be very pleased to be British and proud of what we've done. It's also about reflecting the views of the silent majority, the hard-working patriots who are pleased when their values are put across as an alternative voice, rather than the liberal left domination of the media and social media.

Extract 3: Sir John Hayes, (*Spalding Today*23 November 2020).

Ruth Wodak has described such rhetoric and ideas as an 'arrogance of ignorance,' a backwards-orientated politics infused with much nostalgia and anti-intellectualism (Wodak, 2021: 260), but what was the historical content that was so outrageous that in the Parliamentary debate it necessitated evoking the patriotic language of the Second World War?

The historian Patrick Wright observed that,

The nation is not seen as a heterogeneous society that makes its own history as it moves forward, however chaotically, into the future. Instead it is portrayed as an already achieved and timeless entity which demands only appropriate reverence and protection in the present (Wright, 1986: 34).

It is certainly the case that such reverence has long been directed at English country houses. They embody tradition and values, and their material inheritance has been kept safe and secure through a continuing project of preservation, a project that by its very nature is both necessarily defensive and reflective of a particular understanding of the past. Instrumental in this project of preservation has been the National Trust with its original charitable mission to ' promote the permanent preservation for the benefit of the Nation of lands and tenements (including buildings) of beauty or historic interest.' In the context of the culture war and the Trust's mission the expected story to be told was that of *how the British Parliament abolished the transatlantic slave trade and how the selflessness of white abolitionists has been memorialised and eulogised as central to the Conservative*

view of history: ' Our's is the party of Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery; the party of Shaftsbury and the Factory Acts; that of Disraeli's "elevation of the people" and the party of Margaret Thatcher who freed the economy and unlocked opportunity' (Hayes, 2018).

The National Trust *Colonialism and Historic Slavery* report was based on historical evidence, in particular the detailed database of the *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership project*. This project funded first by the *UK Economic and Social Sciences Research Council*(2009-2012) and then by the UK *Arts and Humanities Research Council*(2013-15) has provided not only the empirical evidence of linkages to slavery but also contextualisation of that evidence. In the context of the criticism and public invective directed at the Trust's findings the *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* project put out a statement on its website that the Trust had ' been attacked for its honesty and determination to broaden the histories they make available to their visitors and provide more exploration of the complex pasts of the properties they curate and the people who occupied them.' It reaffirmed ' how crucially important rigorous scholarship is for how we present stories of the past. Whatever the discomfort of these stories, their telling is our obligation to the public and we must always take it seriously' and concluded that 'it is a concern for all of us committed to historical truth ' (Legacies of British Slave-Ownership, 2020).[5] So we have an alternative history, one that addresses the long history of the nation's involvement in the slave trade, the suffering of the enslaved and the economic and social benefits the nation accrued through the slave economy and colonialism.

Two very different stories. The former is self-congratulatory, nationalist, and guilty of selective amnesia and omission. The latter is based on evidence and rigorous scholarship. It is not about self-loathing but about historical truth. This is the story told by the National Trust report, but also one which it should be remembered also documented links between Trust properties and the abolition of slavery and campaigns against colonial oppression. Nevertheless, it is a story which for right wing politicians and a partisan media was an act of betrayal, a rewriting of history that shamed the nation.

In *Thinking Reflexively: Opening "Blind Eyes",* the historian Catherine Hall observed that Britain's involvement in the slave trade and slavery is often 'marginalised and forgotten' as something which happened 'over there' (Hall, 2017: 261). The sociologist and political economist William Davies recently made a similar point in relation to arguments over empire and race,

there are still sections of the elite which insist on a paradoxical picture of history, in which Britain was dominant on the world stage yet somehow separate from the various territories and peoples it dominated (Davies, 2021: 14).

This displacement feeds into a belief in a well-meaning liberal empire and in the public memory redemptive myths about colonial uplift which 'persistently mask' historical research that demonstrates 'the British Empire's morally bankrupt foundation in racism, violence, extraction, expropriation and exploitation' (Satia, 2020:4). At the end of empire this desire to present the British empire in a positive light led to the destruction of government archives to hide 'the racist and prejudicial behaviour' of colonial officials in Malaya and in the case of Kenya the systematic destruction of thousands of official files which documented the brutal suppression of the Mau Mau insurgency [6] (Ovenden, 2020:176-177). At the end of empire, the 'empire came home' as immigrants from the Commonwealth came to the UK and settled. Their British-born-descendants are asking new questions and creating new narratives about the experiences of empire. This is a history that demands accountability and an acceptance of the historical reality of empire rather than the mythology. In 2014 the Foreign Office condemned the 'iniquities' of the slave trade but insisted that 'these shameful practices belong to the past' and that 'Governments today cannot take responsibility for what happened over 200 years ago' (Reynolds, 2021: 49). It is a history which requires reparatory justice.

It would be wrong to suggest that it is only the present Conservative government that have placed nationalist sentiment and heritage above history. In the 1980s Margaret Thatcher, like Johnson, turned towards the Victorian past, or as Priya Satia described it: 'a mythical vision of that past, including unapologetic imperialism and militarism.' To illustrate this, Satia points to the 1982 war over the Falkland Islands which 'depended on and profoundly appealed to historically minded nationalist sentiment that … tried to compensate for the apparent poverty of the present with a nostalgic vision of the past' (Satia, 2020: 271). It was a sentiment in which to have equal rights in society, was to be part of, and share in, common historical experiences, culture, language and religion as Thatcher commented: 'the people of the Falkland Islands, like the people of the United Kingdom, are an island race. Their way of life is British; their allegiance to the Crown' and '… they are our own people. With the Falkland Islanders it is family' (Barnett, 1982: 18). It was a definition of belonging where to be black and to be British were mutually exclusive, 'the Falklanders were British … by language, customs and race … more British indeed than so-called Black Englishmen living on British soil' (Casey, 1982:25). It was a

definition of belonging which invoked metaphors of ‘nation,’ ‘family’ and ‘the British way of life’ as a centrepiece of British identity. Belonging could not be conferred, it could not be given, it was felt. Thatcher’s successor as Prime Minister, John Major, echoed this nationalist sentiment and the distinctive nature of British identity:

we will always remain British citizens. I will never, come hell or high water, let our distinctive British identity be lost in a federal Europe … and to those who offer us gratuitous advice, I remind them of what a thousand years of history should have told them: you cannot bully Britain (Major, 1992).

History was ‘the anchor’ that gave ‘experience and … continuity … to our national life’ (Major, 1993). For Major the past was a constant and symbolic, ‘Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds [7], warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and … “old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist” and … Shakespeare still read in school (Major, 1994)

Conclusion

‘All historians are storytellers’ (Harkness, 2009). The historian’s craft as a storyteller is dependent on the use of evidence, structured argumentation, and scrupulous knowledge of historiography. In the struggle to bring together what belongs together, it is the historian who anchors that which is uncovered. History is never static, and it is a truism that every new generation of historians will ask new questions of the past and consequently historical interpretation will change and there will be new narratives, new stories (Plumb, 1969: 144; Hill, 1989: 11). Rewriting history is what historians do. ‘The promise of history as an imaginative practice’, as Bill Schwarz writes, is that it can free us from mere “pastness” and make speakable what was once unspeakable.’ (Schwarz, 2011: 13). The ‘speakable’ and the ‘unspeakable,’ the telling and the silence brings us full circle to the words which opened this essay, ‘Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.’ Okri’s text continues,

Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those

lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings (Grosvenor et al, 2002: 21).

History has become a battleground in a manufactured and politically motivated culture war. As historians we have a responsibility to the truth and our task is to enable all citizens to know what has been silenced or forgotten. Silencing the past 'normalizes the present as the only possible present' (Satia, 2020: 282). Historical knowledge needs to be both shared and reclaimed for the future.

The culture war of 2020 and 2021 over competing versions of the past has so dominated political debate, television, the press, and social media platforms that it has absorbed attention and space to the exclusion of critical engagement with the evident slow and gradual normalization of far-right populism in Britain, where ideas and practices have arrived at the centre of society, alongside a conscious shift to authoritarianism. There has been an unrelenting onslaught on civil liberties, human rights, the rule of law and democracy itself. By stealth Britain is becoming more authoritarian. In *Britain's authoritarian turn*(2021) Frances Webber has identified a raft of new legislation and government proposals in the fields of crime, policing, and immigration and asylum which have long been part of the right-wing agenda for change. The proposed police, crime, sentencing and courts legislation will give new powers to the police to restrict the fundamental right of peaceful protest, including a new offence of 'intentionally or recklessly causing public nuisance' which is in part defined as causing 'serious annoyance' or 'serious inconvenience.' Restrictions on the legal accountability of state actors and recourse to the courts to challenge unlawful ministerial decisions are also under threat, while legal protections for asylum seekers are threatened with removal, the rights of those recognised as refugees withheld and a policy to 'offshore' asylum seekers to remote British territories (Webber, 2021: 106-120). As Webber concludes,

In sum, the first year of the new Johnson government has shown a frightening and steady disregard for civil liberties; a piecemeal but systematic dismantling of fundamental legal safeguards for such liberties; a process of muzzling or domesticating any institution whose remit is to safeguard the individual against overweening executive power; and media-assisted vilification of those who challenge that power (Webber, 2021: 115).

This damning charge comes on top of the government's illegal suspension of parliament during the Brexit negotiations and the passage of illegal Brexit legislation. The government has also intimidated and weakened the power of the Electoral Commission by pushing for changes which will have the effect of disenfranchising poor and non-white citizens and it has operated an informal system of unregulated nepotism in awarding contracts and making appointments to public bodies. Indeed, in the latter case the government has been accused of a policy of concerted 'cultural cleansing' in the arts and cultural sector, vetoing the reappointment of Board members who did not have 'a similar attitude to that of the government' and thereby resetting the balance of opinion in the sector (Barker et al, 2021). The culture war of 2020-21 has been a trap to suck up the oxygen of debate, while in the background a space has been created to redefine British politics.

This agenda is not just an 'English story of History in the present.' The interference of government in defining what version of national history should be told is not an experience unique to the UK. Neo-liberalism and global capitalism have combined to produce the conditions in which discord, instability and social polarisation can flourish and populist administrations in Hungary, Poland and the USA have all sought through their own version of culture wars to control the past in the present and to intimidate academics (Burleigh, 2021; Wodak, 2021). In short, a new "normal" is emerging in global politics where historical truth is being abandoned in favour of ' forgetting, misremembering and mistaking the past' (Andress, 2018: 47) and in the shadows the norms of democracy are being slowly dismantled and the rights of citizens incrementally eroded.

As historians we should continue to 'brush history against the grain,' but we should remember that knowledge 'is not a goal in itself, but a path to wisdom; it bestows not privilege so much as duty, not power so much as responsibility' (Sivanandan, 1982: 89). It is our duty and responsibility to call out the lies.

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Notes

[1] The Scottish Government has committed to reviewing colonial and slavery history in its museum collections https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/09/scottish-government-to-review-colonial-and-slavery-history-in-museum-collections/

[2] The statue of Cecil Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford University has been the focus of a campaign for removal, see Rhodes Must Fall Movement, Oxford, *Rhodes Must Fall* London,: Zed Books. 2018.

[3] At the time of writing the death toll was 127,538

[4] Rees-Mogg, Conservative Leader of the House of Commons.

[5] See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/ The project has transitioned now into the Centre for Legacies of British Slave-ownership at University College London.

[6] The Mau Mau uprising (1952-60) was a war in the British Kenya Colony between the Kenya Land and Freedom Army and the British Colonial authorities.

[7] ‘county grounds’ is a reference the grounds where the national sport of English cricket is played during the summer months