

ARTS

Hidden figures

The statue-topplers reveal a Eurocentric view of the world that ignores the achievements of black and Asian luminaries, says *Tanjil Rashid*

On my visits to Bristol in the past, there was always a certain statue peering over the city centre that would trigger heightened emotions in me. I'm not talking about the recently toppled monument of slave-trader Edward Colston, but the memorial to another representative of empire: the radical scholar and reformer Raja Rammohan Roy, who came to London in 1830 as the ambassador of the Mughal Emperor (who was by then a titular sovereign under the rule of the East India Company), and died in Bristol three years later. He now stands in pride of place on College Green, outside the cathedral, about five minutes' walk from where the Colston statue stood, until last weekend.

Both statues commemorate quintessential products of the British Empire. And yet they couldn't have been less alike. The moneyed, dandyish Colston, portrayed with cane in hand, was an unscrupulous capitalist who earned a fortune from the enslavement of 84,000 Africans, whereas the austere, scholarly Rammohan Roy, seen wielding a hardback, was a spiritual reformer who wrote and campaigned in five languages, notably against child marriage and widow-burning.

About Colston's neighbour, there remains a telling ignorance. Roy's name doesn't come up in discussions about Bristol's public space, despite the prominence of memorials to him throughout the city. The 'decolonise' movement pushing for the removal of imperialist monuments (distinct from Black Lives Matter) is curiously apathetic about recognising the achievements of such black and Asian luminaries, even though it might have learned something from a man who was decolonising society two centuries ago. Once in Britain, Roy campaigned for a parliamentary crackdown on the East India Company and for democratic enfranchisement in the Reform Bill, threatening to quit the empire if it wasn't passed.

Would-be decolonisers are ostensibly in favour of an inclusive, warts-and-all history of Britain's entanglements with the world. But they seem obsessed by a very particular congealment of warts (Cromwell, Clive of India, Cecil Rhodes, Churchill), which has the effect of making their version of history a Eurocentric pantomime in which the fate of vast swathes of the world lay, improbably,

in the hands of a band of nefarious British statesmen alone. If the cast list sounds familiar, it's because the movement is ironically replicating the Whiggish 'Island Story' narrative public schoolboys were once suckled on, and it's no coincidence that everyone I know who is active in this movement was privately educated. It's hard to avoid the sense that the white guilt they have made their collective shibboleth is a subconscious form of white pride.

And that's why a figure like Rammohan Roy, whose life demonstrates how colonial subjects weren't just passive victims of white men like Colston, gets short shrift. The father of India's Renaissance in the 19th century was much the son of empire, his genius fomented by the arrival from Britain of empirical science, constitutional liberalism and the Protestant zeal for literacy. But he also fused these with traditional Sufi and Vedantic scholarship, thereby inau-

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gurating what would become the prevailing outlook of the postcolonial world, which reconciles science, technology and European languages with modernised customs and reformed beliefs.

Thanks to Roy, Hindu widows are nowhere obliged to leap into their husbands' funeral pyres. Colonial governors played their part by getting legislation passed, but it was Roy's original polemics in Bengali and Persian that persuaded Hindus to spurn this ritual. *Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females*, from 1822, may be the first non-European work of feminism. It was written in the seething intellectual climate of empire in which all the world's traditions were being plundered, and not just by Western orientalis; this was a two-way street.

The modish trashing of the Enlightenment as 'racist' exposes the decolonise movement unwittingly exalting Europe as the fount of knowledge. Its critical energies are lavishly spent on Western thinkers, as if Europe were the only place doing any thinking at this time. There's an urge to dethrone

Immanuel Kant, but none to study his contemporary: Rammohan Roy. He offered Asia a vision of emancipation to challenge, even influence Europe's. Spain's 1812 constitution was dedicated to 'Al liberalismo del noble, sabio, y virtuoso Brahma Rammohan Roy', to the liberalism of the noble, wise and virtuous Rammohan Roy.

A hundred million Indian schoolchildren could proudly tell you about Rammohan Roy's achievements. But the decolonise movement here is unmoved by these nuances of empire. Roy simply cannot compete for attention with Colston. To the decolonise movement, the latter's villainy irresistibly affirms the centrality of the white race to history, a source of much subliminal comfort.

Meanwhile, the now-derided Bristol City Council, which has been run by parties of the centre-left for 50 years, has sympathetically recognised black and Asian history in its public space, diligently honouring Rammohan Roy. Besides the statue, a bronze bust sits in the town hall, a symbol for ethnic minority councillors of successful political engagement. Roy's mausoleum — a lovely limestone pavilion erected over his grave in 1844 — was recently restored, and is a focal point for Bristol's Indian, Bangladeshi and women's associations. A plaque marks the spot where Roy died. His portrait (see p27) is in the city museum. (So is a lock of his hair.)

Civic inclusion of this kind is more fruitful than toppling statues. But the decolonisers never build anything. The #RhodesMustFall Oxford mission statement reads: 'Statues and symbols matter; they are a means through which communities express their values.' Rhodes must therefore be removed from his perch at Oriel College, Oxford, because he is emblematic of white supremacy. Fine. But if this were a sincerely held conviction, it should follow that there would be a push to commemorate the black and Asian minds produced by that university. There is only a half-hearted murmur to do so. In Bristol, a bid to replace Colston's statue with one of a veteran black campaigner is blatantly an afterthought. The rule is to fixate, with Oedipal vigour, on the great white men of history.

If the real mass of black and Asian people in this country were consulted, as opposed to



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an unrepresentative (though often very eloquent) set of activist-journalists who make this cause credible, it would be obvious these mute, lifeless effigies are not experienced as a 'micro-aggression', a notion that sounds frivolous to anyone who experienced the racial animus of earlier decades.

My father left school in what was then Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at 16, and came to this country to work first in textile mills, then in curry houses. Lost in the obscure streets of a strange country, he would, upon seeing the familiar names engraved

on imperial plinths, regain his bearing. To him, they were signposts of a shared history. London's epicentre was thus marked, strangely, by the statue in Trafalgar Square of Charles Napier, who conquered Pakistan's Sindh province.

Of their sins my father was far from ignorant. Taking me on walks when I was little, he'd be prompted by such monuments to pass down the experience of empire: how Clive of India overthrew us, the Muslims of Bengal, at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, or of how our rural community starved during the

1943 Bengal famine, which Churchill arguably exacerbated.

Later, when I worked in Whitehall, I'd walk past the Clive memorial outside the Foreign Office several times a day. I came to identify with it. To my mind, this statue, more than Gandhi's round the corner at Parliament Square, revealed why I'd ended up here, why I wasn't ploughing rice paddies in the old country, embodying the truth that we are here because they were there. Black and Asian people have something in common with these slabs of stone and bronze, flotsam from the same shipwreck of the past.

I am bitterly aware of the iniquity of empire. But that Bristolians now know far more about Colston's sinister dealings, but

Figures who show how colonial subjects weren't just passive victims of white men like Colston get short shrift

precious little about the achievements of the more extensively commemorated Rammohan Roy, suggests that antagonism nowadays cuts through better than glorification.

Today's decolonisers would end up sanitising our cities into bland, inoffensive spaces, untethered from the complex, often tragic forces that shaped them. Without these tokens of the past, we risk becoming ignorant, as well as deracinated and unmoored from history. I have a feeling this, in fact, is the intent. In some people I spy the zeal of the felon wishing to strike out his criminal record. Or worse: the utopian desire to make of our past a blank slate on which to project back — without the hindrance of inconvenient facts — the brave new ideologies of the future.

Rammohan Roy, a prolific theologian who attacked irrational religious practices, would have recognised in the actions of last week's iconoclasts an abject ritual quality. They ceremoniously dumped Colston into the river Avon, just like the annual immersion into the Ganges of sculpted effigies of the goddess Durga, a baptism meant to purify, to wash away the stain of sin. Whatever absolution this may offer to the psyche, it's not what history should be about.