



# TWELVE THINGS YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT THE COLSTON STATUE THAT *THE GUARDIAN* NEVER TELLS YOU...

*Posted on February 1, 2022 by Mark Stocker*



*The recent trial of the so-called 'Colston Four', who were acquitted of causing criminal damage when the Edward Colston statue in Bristol was toppled, sent shock waves around the civilised world. As a former "classic liberal" Guardian reader and fan till not so long ago, Dr. Mark Stocker decided to pen this piece, originally for the History Reclaimed website. This is a revised and improved version. Mark acknowledges that the issue is a highly divisive one, but the toppling and subsequent trial only intensified his belief that "Retain and explain," a now famous phrase that he coined, is the only way to go for the overwhelmingly majority of public statuary worldwide.*

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1. The bleeding obvious: the statue, by being toppled and then thrown into the harbour, was subject to blatant criminal damage, hence the trial of identifiable participants. As far as I know, none of the Famous Four wrote to Bristol City Council beforehand seeking permission to topple it or even to have it peacefully relocated to a museum.
2. The statue is a Grade II listed historical monument, subject to legal protection. The topplers, if they knew about this (which seems unlikely) disregarded it.
3. Professor David Olusoga has several times pronounced on the statue's supposed artistic mediocrity. What are his art historical credentials that qualify him to do so? The monument is a highly capable piece of Victorian portrait statuary by the Irish Catholic sculptor, John Cassidy, resident in England because he probably would have faced penury at home. Stylistically it combines sartorial realism with an attractive Art Nouveau pedestal. Edward Colston's pensive stance and body language suggests a thoughtful man, the philanthropist that he manifestly was. The pose is influenced by such London statues as Sidney Herbert (sculpted by Cassidy's fellow Irishman J.H. Foley) and General Gordon (by Hamo Thornycroft). As an art historian and retired curator, I believe society should care for art like this, not topple and deface it.
4. Simply identifying Colston as a "slave trader" is a dead political giveaway, and is both lazy and misleading. Indeed, it is probably about as accurate as identifying Edward Heath as a musical conductor.
5. Colston was no mass murderer, as Olusoga claims—something he didn't say 18 months

ago—even if many slaves tragically suffered when they were transported or subsequently worked to death on plantations. I certainly don't believe in making light of Colston's indirect involvement in such deaths but there seems to be a compulsion among his critics to denigrate him exponentially, so much so that at times he seemed to be posthumously on trial rather than the Famous Four. Is it naïve to suggest that Colston deserves at least partial redemption when he resigned from the Royal African Company and devoted his energies to the philanthropy that was central to all accounts of him up to the 1990s?

6. We don't even know how much Colston personally profited from the slave trade. Consider what the main historian in the area, Professor Kenneth Morgan, has to say in *Edward Colston and Bristol* (1999): "To what extent Colston received money from the sale of slaves in the New World is unknown. He was undoubtedly remunerated for his work on the committees of the Royal African Company, but whether his money was the basis of his fortune remains conjectural." No new information has surfaced since Morgan's publication, so the repeated assertions that Colston made his fortune that way remain mere conjecture. Morgan's research suggests it was likely that Colston made more money as a merchant of textiles and sherry, and almost certainly far more as a shrewd moneylender.
7. The topplers make an elementary error in their history. Write out 100 times: "That was then, this is now." To quote what the historian Professor Trevor Burnard told me: "Everyone was invested in slavery in the late seventeenth century—Locke, for example, was a big supporter—and the monarchy was a supporter more than most." The governor of the Royal African Company in Colston's time was the King (Charles II, James II, William III), whereas Colston was deputy governor, not necessarily entitling him to the dirty monies of the slave trade. Obviously we all wish today that Colston had opposed slavery (just as one wishes he had supported Bristol Rovers), but what happened, happened.
8. The estimated costs for the statue's repair and restoration, £3750, are risibly and artificially low. This is because the threshold for a criminal damage trial in a magistrate's court—where the Colston Four would have appeared had they not elected to go before a jury—is £5000. I know on good authority that the costs are probably closer to £20,000.
9. The jury were subjected to irrational and emotional pleading, amounting to bullying and intimidation. As I've said, it sometimes seemed more of a trial of Colston (based on inadequate

evidence) than of the Four. Among other things, the jury were told by the defence to make sure they were “on the right side of history.” Surely history should not have sides but facts? Regrettably, jury members could probably be recognised and would very likely have been subjected to intimidation (e.g. smashed windows, slashed tyres) by pro-toppling activists had they opted to convict.

10. The prosecution didn't seem to try very hard. They didn't call on an expert witness to counter Olusoga and when I attempted to offer assistance, supplying a link to my History Reclaimed article, “The future will be grateful for thy eternal goodness,” which specifically addresses Colston, my email was ignored.
11. A frequently repeated canard—or is it laziness?—repeated by the “liberal” press is that the anti-topplers are invariably Tory reactionaries. A YouGov poll did show more Labour voters agreed than disagreed with the acquittal of the Colston Four, but 53% were in the “disagree” or “don't know” categories. Disagreement with the verdict was overwhelming among Tories and decisive among Liberal Democrats. I'm hoping against hope that one or two prominent and brave Labour and LD figures could stick their heads above the parapet and express their concerns about the verdict too. A great start would be the distinguished former Director of Public Prosecutions, one Sir Keir Starmer. Pigs can fly!
12. A talking point. Aren't there significant parallels between the acquittal of the Colston Four and that of Kyle Rittenhouse, involved in the Kenosha unrest shooting? Whatever we may think of the verdicts, the associated gloating coming from the left (Colston Four) and the right (Rittenhouse) is pretty sickening.

And a bonus on a more positive note: a dear friend, who happens to be a lifelong Labour Party supporter, wrote me this a couple of hours ago: “I agree with you about the futility and sadness of destroying the emblems of bygone years. There are numerous generals and dukes whose monuments seem unjustified today, but that isn't their point. I wish we were as energetic in dealing with modern slavery as statues of men associated with oppression hundreds of years ago.” I couldn't put it better.

*Mark Stocker is an art historian whose recent book is [When Britain Went Decimal: The Coinage of 1971](#).*

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*Featured image: John Cassidy, Edward Colston, 1895. Formerly The Centre, Bristol.*

