THE POLITICS OF PLACE

Red walls, green walls: British identity, rural racism and British colonial history

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Talking about the countryside's many links with empire has met with fierce political opposition. Nonetheless, recent historical evidence provides invaluable insights into colonialism's impact on Britain itself. Acknowledging this sensitive history respectfully but comprehensively will ensure widespread understanding of British colonial history and its many legacies to us today.

The British countryside is a sensitive topic. This was confirmed by my experience of directing 'Colonial Countryside', a child-led history and writing project guided by a team of historians in partnership with the National Trust. Our aim was to make country houses' colonial connections widely known. This article reflects on why projects like Colonial Countryside, and the National Trust report on colonialism which followed it, are perceived as threats to British identity. I identify the broader challenges and consider their implications for policy-making in the areas of rural inclusion and history education. I detail common objections to talking about British colonial history, especially in rural settings. Rather

than dividing people, exploring our colonial past can greatly enrich the nation's knowledge about the past, as well as contextualising and historicising its complex cultural identities.

A common objection to examining British colonial history is the argument that we should instead focus on the oppression of Britons in both factories and fields, histories of which are recounted in works like E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.[1] Fascinating accounts of Chartists, Jacobins and suffragettes have been invaluable to the labour and trade union movements. Yet history shows us that impoverishment at home and oppression in the colonies were in fact interrelated. Contrary to popular belief, Britain's social history of industrial exploitation, rural poverty, enclosure and land-ownership are not separate from colonial activity but integral to it. Another objection is that the past is the past, and we should let it lie. Another is known as 'whataboutery', often expressed in terms of African and Arab nations' slaving histories. The answer to these objections is that curators have a responsibility not to withhold the full history of heritage sites: it is incredible that, for decades, on-site interpretation made no mention of the fact that country houses like Basildon Park and Penrhyn Castle were built with East India Company profits and slavery wealth. Telling the truth is not unpatriotic nor deliberately provocative or divisive. It is an ethical commitment to evidence-based and inclusive accounts of our past.

The challenge

It is important to distinguish between public feeling about rural Britain and strategic political rhetoric about 'wokeness', focused on the countryside. We need an explanation of why perceived threats to British history and heritage resonate with people.

There is a potent, longstanding association between the countryside and British identity. To suggest that rural Britain has anything to do with the outside world, and Empire in particular, is seen as transgressive. Yet the evidence demonstrates that British colonialism was formative of the countryside rather than separate from it. For many, this information is painful and troubling: it changes our perceptions of cherished places that we thought we knew.

In September 2020, the National Trust released a report which found that a third of its houses were linked to the British empire. The report was not simply about slavery but incorporated all kinds of colonial activities associated with National Trust properties. These included colonial wars, colonial administration and commerce associated with enterprises like the East India Company. The report also provided details of African, Chinese and Indian servants who served in country houses. It was widely welcomed by historians, including the Royal Historical Society, the Legacies of British Slave-Ownership project and other major research initiatives, such as the

East India Company at Home project. The report was long in the making and reflects a sector-wide view that it would be wrong to remain silent on the topic any longer. The Trust's report was closely followed by Historic England's report on the connections between slavery and England's built heritage. All of this work had been commissioned well before the Black Lives Matter protests, but the reports were released at a time of intense debate about how we, as a nation, commemorate, represent or deny our colonial past.

Initially, the report was well-received by the media, and even Policy Exchange (an organisation which generally discourages such initiatives) found that 76 per cent of National Trust members think the organisation should talk about its properties' colonial connections. However, 59 Common Sense Group MPs and Peers declared a 'culture war', and later produced an online publication called 'Common Sense. Conservative Thinking for a Post-Liberal Age'.[2] Sir John Hayes, its leader, even suggested that the Historic England report 'should be shredded'.[3] Jacob Rees-Mogg gave a speech in the House of Commons suggesting that the report was denigrating history (and Churchill in particular); [4] and Ann Widdecombe resigned her National Trust membership on account of Churchill being associated with slavery (though the report does not associate Churchill with slavery).[5] Following this, there was an investigation by the Charity Commission about a perceived breach of its charitable purpose, but the Commission later vindicated the National Trust for researching its own properties.[6] There was a debate about the report in Parliament Hall (November 2020) and in the House of Lords (December 2020) on the Trust's 125th anniversary.[7]

Following this, the *Telegraph, Daily Mail* and *Spectator* ran hostile pieces aimed at the reputation of both the National Trust and Colonial Countryside historians, some of the leading scholars of British Imperial History. The *Daily Telegraph* questioned the 'intellectual heft' of the report's editors, saying that the report is 'one-sided' and 'woke'.[8] The aim of the report, however, had been to address an incomplete account of country house history. There had been decades of silence about country houses' links to empire, broken only by a series of temporary exhibitions to mark the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave-Trade in 2007. This silence was pervasive, even when country houses' colonial links were central to the history of those properties, sometimes accounting for houses' very existence. *The Times* and *Daily Mail* suggested that the National Trust had engaged a team of 'politically biased historians';[9] and I was called a 'half-wit' in the *Spectator*.[10] As historians have long demonstrated, however, four centuries of colonial rule had a huge and inevitable impact not just on its colonies but on Britain itself. The degree of public outrage, stirred up by this media coverage, could only be possible in a country where public knowledge about empire is so poor as to allow evidence-based work to be so readily dismissed as mere opinion. MPs – particularly women and black MPs – will have little difficulty imagining the threats and hate mail which then followed such articles, to which I was given no right of reply.

In response to this growing hostility, historical organisations all over the country wrote an open letter, published in *The Sunday Times*, which defended Colonial Countryside and asserted historians' right to research sensitive histories.[11] The question remains as to what can be done to move beyond the politics of division and to have a constructive and reasoned national conversation about our past. How can we get beyond the impasse for the sake of future generations?

The cause

Many Common Sense Group members were formerly part of the European Research Group which promoted a 'hard' Brexit: the 'war on woke' is similarly divisive, with historians of empire being presented as the ultimate enemies of civic pride. Senior politicians have only added to these fears by viewing British colonial history through the lenses of guilt and shame, suggesting that talking in detail about Britain's four hundred years of colonial activity endangers national identity itself. The historian Margot Finn argues that the empire genie has been let out of the bottle.[12] There are two ways to deal with this unfamiliar history of Britain's colonial past. We can try to stuff the genie back into the bottle, or we can look it in the eye.

But research also reveals why the message that the nation is under attack, especially when it relates to the countryside, finds fertile ground. Rural Studies research has shown that rural Britain (and particularly England) is seen to embody the national soul. As Kavita Maya recently explained in her piece in *Renewal*, experts in rural racism have also established that there is a persistent and longstanding perception that the countryside is a space where white people most naturally belong, and always have done. Recent historical research shows that this is not the case. The misperception that Black and Asian Britons do not belong in the countryside is linked to a belief that the countryside was never diverse. This is simply not the case: there is a growing body of scholarly work which shows the longstanding and substantial presence of Black and Asian people in rural Britain, since Roman times, throughout the Tudor period and especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, very few people think that the countryside has much to do with the outside world, and certainly nothing to do with colonial history. As the National Trust and Historic England reports of 2020 both show, the countryside was lastingly shaped by wildly different kinds of colonial activity, in the East and West Indies, which had a cumulative impact on British rural life and the countryside's built heritage – in the shape of philanthropic funding for buildings, railway-building, enclosure of the commons and much more.

The question remains: why does it come as such a surprise to the British public that empire was so powerfully formative of Britain itself? As discussed in Hannah Elias's recent article for *Renewal*, the problem lies in school history lessons, past and present. My own school history books show that I studied the Battle of Hastings, the

Great Fire, the Tudors, medieval castles, British kings and queens and the Civil War. I received no formal education about the British empire until I entered university. This is true for almost every Briton in the country. Unlike me, many British people did study the short history of abolition, but very few realise that Haitians abolished the slave trade before Britain did. Almost no British schoolchildren ever studied the (far longer) history of their country's involvement in the slavery business and in slave-trading, which officially began in 1663. Given empire's seismic global impact and its mass movements of people and wealth, the omission seems more than accidental. The consequences are grave. 'If we want to understand British racism', Salman Rushdie once wrote, 'it is impossible to grasp the nature of the beast unless we understand its historical roots.'[13] Rushdie penned these words three decades ago but he might have written them yesterday. In the intervening years, no government, Labour or Conservative, has addressed this knowledge gap. Until this happens, no generation will be able to handle colonialism's legacy. No government will be able to respond intelligently to revelations about empire's long reach into Britain's counties and shires. The nation will remain unable to grasp what British colonialism entailed, or to engage critically with the enduring nostalgia for Empire which is most keenly felt in Britain's green and pleasant lands.

Policy implications

When it comes to the 'culture war', the golden rule is not to fight. It is important to dispose of war metaphors: being on the frontline, donning your amour, being on the battlefield. None of this helps because fighting only perpetuates a war which will further polarise the debate. What is needed is a compassionate understanding that this is a sensitive history with trauma on one side and historical denial on the other. The best policy is to make the case for talking about this history. This is the first step. The 'arms-length' principle remains vital: curators and heritage professionals must have the freedom to use their expertise to explore their colonial connections. There is enormous scope for mass participation projects which draw people together to explore British colonial history, particularly at the intersection of working-class and colonial history. Cornish copper, for example, not only employed a third of the county, but was used to line ships so that they could fight in tropical colonial wars.[14] Bringing together Britons with ancestral connections to both copper production and the Atlantic World provides an alternative route through the impasse.

Civic pride remains a pressing issue, and the idea that British history is being trashed is a prevalent theme in national debates about British colonial history. In response to this, and to the contention that we should not judge the past by present-day standards, it is advisable to provide examples of the many Britons and colonial subjects who were engaged in anti-colonial activities which continue to

inspire us today, presenting alternative approaches to developing a sense of civic pride. Finally, it is essential that British schoolchildren are given a full account of our colonial past. No one should leave school without knowing what the Royal African Company or East India Company are. Or about Britain's involvement in the slavery business.

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Notes

1 E.P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class*, Gollancz 1963.
2 The Common Sense Group: http://www.thecommonsensegroup.com.
3 'MP Calls for Lincolnshire slavery report to be shredded', 18 March 2021: https://www.bbc.co.uk.
4 Jacob Rees Mogg, 'House of Commons Speech', 24 September 2020: https://hansard.parliament.uk.
5 Adrian Zorzut, 'Ann Widdecombe cancels National Trust membership in protest at body's "woke agenda"', *The New European*, 23 September 2020.
6 National Trust blog, 'Response to the Charity Commission's statement', 11 March 2021: https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk.
7 'The Future of the National Trust', Parliamentary Hall, 11 November 2020; 'National Trust. 125th Anniversary', House of Lords, 15 December 2020.
8 Simon Heffer, 'I've read the National Trust report and it's a one-sided take on history full of woke prejudices', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 November 2020.
9 Charles Parker, 'National Trust accused of bias in study of colonial history', 16 December 2020: https://www.thetimes.co.uk; Danyal Hussain, 'National Trust is accused of recruiting "biased" team of academics to probe its properties' links to empire and the slave trade', 16 December 2020: www.dailymail.co.uk.
10 Taki Theodoracopulos, 'Why I'm Moving to England', 1 October 2020: https://www.spectator.co.uk.
11 Royal Historical Society, 'RHS asks Government to clarify its position on historical research', 21 March 2021: https://royalhistsoc.org.
12 Alex Barker and Peter Foster, 'The war on woke: who should shape Britain's history?', 11 June 2021: https://www.ft.com.
13 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London, Granta 1991, p132.
14 Chris Evans, *Slave Wales. The Welsh and Atlantic Slavery, 1660-1859*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 2010, p35.