

We must not hide our history

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Not least because of our increasing awareness of the scale of slavery in the contemporary world it is salutary to reflect on and document the more widespread and systematic use of slavery in earlier times.

But to throw the statue of a Bristol slave-trader into the river Avon is less a blow for historical truth than the removal of an historical artefact from the historical record. And to rename the Colston Hall the Beacon means that he will be forgotten, whereas he should be remembered. How much better to have retained the statue and complemented it with a nearby account of the inhumane sources of the wealth that underpinned his philanthropy.

In the late 1900s many would have been horrified at the suggestion that a statue of Oscar Wilde be placed in Merrion Square. His status in the 2000s is the result of a socio-historical process by which society has come to recognize that his writing is superb, irrespective of his sexual orientation.

At an earlier stage, society had begun to recognize that slavery wasn't to be understood as an aspect of divine order, but a moral obscenity. So while the people of Bristol may rightly admire the splendid older streetscape of their city, they should be aware of the cruelty and injustice on which it is founded. In the same way, tourists may admire the beauty of Versailles, but should do so in the knowledge that it was financed by the taxes of those who were least able to pay.

The fact that Lionel Messi has a somewhat cavalier attitude to the payment of taxes and that Cristiano Ronaldo is one of the most narcissistic sportsmen of our age in no way detracts from their genius on the football pitch.

So we shouldn't pretend that Berkeley never existed nor decide that his philosophy is without worth. Academic integrity demands that we recognize his thinking for whatever intrinsic value it has for our attempts to understand and explain our world – and we place alongside it the fact that he lived in a time when intelligent and otherwise upstanding and even pious men and women could fail to find slavery morally reprehensible.

How many times a day does a tour guide on Front Square recount that George Salmon declared that women would enter College 'over my dead body' – and how they subsequently did just that? How much less effective the story of his misogyny would be if it could no longer be told in front of his statue.