

# Why Trinity naming row may be a sign of things to come

Trinity students argue a library honouring slave-owning philosopher George Berkeley should be renamed – but he's far from the only figure in Irish history whose actions are now unacceptable

## Andrew Lynch



### NEWS REVIEW

So why are some students in Trinity College Dublin revolting again?

Because they've joined a global protest movement that claims many of our public buildings and monuments are honouring the wrong people.

On August 23, the President of Trinity's Student Union (TCDSU) Gabi Fullam wrote an open letter to Provost Linda Doyle. Her message was clear – our university's Berkeley Library is named after a racist and we demand you start the process of giving it a new title.

Whether or not TCDSU's campaign succeeds, this is an issue that's already caused divisions in many other countries – and there's plenty of scope for it to grow here too.

**First of all, who is the Berkeley these students find so offensive?**

George Berkeley (1685-1753) is the most famous philosopher Ireland has ever produced. He was also an Anglican bishop and a Trinity graduate.

The Berkeley Library was opened in 1967, but by then he already had a whole

American university and city called after him.

Berkeley's beliefs are hard to sum up, but fundamentally he argued all material objects are just notions created by our brains and depend on factors such as distance.

Television comedy fans might be reminded of a famous scene from *Father Ted* in which the title character shows a toy cow to Father Dougal, explaining, "These are small, but the ones out there are far away."

**That all sounds quite worthy, so what's got Trinity students up in arms?**

Simple – recent research has shown that Berkeley was also a slave owner. At one time, the Bishop had a plan to kidnap Native American children and convert what he called "savages" to Christianity at a seminary in Bermuda.

He bought at least four slaves to work his land and may have brought one or more home to Ireland.

Some academics have defended Berkeley on the grounds that most people had racist views back then.

However, his critics point out that other 18th-century philosophers were already condemning slavery as a great evil – while the Irishman was giving religious sermons to justify it.

**What's the international movement that Trinity students are tapping into? It really started in South**

Africa seven years ago, when undergraduates at the University of Cape Town started a campaign called Rhodes Must Fall.

Specifically, they wanted a statue of the 19th-century British imperialist Cecil Rhodes to be removed from campus – and it was.

This started a worldwide debate about why some monuments in old third-level institutions make people of colour feel alienated.

It became much broader in 2020 after the murder of African-American George Floyd by a white Minneapolis policeman kneeling on his neck, which sparked Black Lives Matter marches in many countries, including Ireland. Around that time, protesters in Bristol tore down a statue of slave trader Edward Colston and threw it in the harbour.

Up until now, the biggest such row in Ireland has been over four bronze sculptures of torch-bearing African women outside Dublin's Shelbourne Hotel. They were removed in 2020 after complaints two of them

depicted slaves. However, researchers soon showed they were actually princesses and the hotel duly put them back again.

**Does Trinity's links with the British Empire give it a particular problem?**

Yes. Founded in 1592 by Queen Elizabeth I, Trinity has been British for much of its



history – and like most old British universities, it benefited hugely from the slave trade.

Records show that even its front gate on College Green was built with money from the sale of tobacco grown by Africans in chains.

Trinity's current authorities have been trying to get ahead of the curve on this issue. In February 2021 they launched a two-year Colonial Legacies Project, designed to have what co-leader Dr Ciaran O'Neill called "a critical conversation about Trinity's multiple connections to empire".

The university has also created a Black Studies module and an Inclusive Curriculum Project to reflect its increasingly diverse student population.

**But now the George Berkeley controversy has brought things to a head?**

Yes. Last February, TCDSU passed an emergency motion calling for the Berkeley Library to be renamed. A student petition gathered more than 300 signatures.

Now union president Gabi Fullam's open letter has significantly upped the ante. As well as announcing that TCDSU will refer to this building as the "X Library" from now on, it gives college authorities a deadline of September 30 to provide a plan before "escalated action is taken".

Whether that means protests, sit-ins or some kind of strike, the union isn't saying for now.

**Is racism the only historic stain on Trinity's record that**

**it needs to worry about?**

No, gender equality, or the lack of it, is a problem too.

In 2018, Meghan Markle visited the Old Library with Prince Harry, turned to the then provost Patrick

Prendergast and asked,

"What's this – 20

male busts on this side and 20 male busts on that side? Where are all the women?" Since then, the university has commissioned four new sculptures of females as "a first step".

However, Trinity still has a statue of the former provost George Salmon, who once said women would only become students "over my dead body". When asked last February if TCDSU might call for his image to be removed as well, the then president Leah Keogh replied, "Absolutely."

**Has Trinity ever "cancelled" anyone like this before?**

Sort of. Also last February, its School of Physics dropped the name of Erwin Schrödinger from a lecture theatre.

Schrödinger was an Austrian Nobel Prize-winning physicist who spent much of his career in Dublin. He was also a paedophile who boasted in his diaries about grooming girls as young as 12. This change, however, was a departmental decision. Renaming the Berkeley Library is a matter for Trinity's governing body – a much bigger deal.

**Finally, why should anyone outside Trinity care what it call its library?**

Because this could be a sign of things to come. Many places and buildings across Ireland are named after people who said or did things that are much less acceptable today.

To take just a few examples, Arthur Griffith

made anti-Semitic comments, Patrick Pearse wrote a poem about kissing a boy and Daniel O'Connell cheated on his wife so often it was said you couldn't throw a stone in Kerry without hitting one of his children.

It all boils down to one question: where do you draw the line? Even a great philosopher like Bishop Berkeley might struggle to find an answer that would keep everybody happy.

*He bought  
at least  
four slaves  
to work  
his land*



Prendergast and asked: "What's



**Client:** Trinity College Dublin  
**Source:** The Herald (Dublin)  
**Date:** 06/09/2022  
**Page:** 12  
**Reach:** 6487  
**Value:** 11604.7100

---



Some students are calling for Trinity College Dublin's Berkeley Library to be renamed over its links to George Berkeley (inset), who was a slave owner