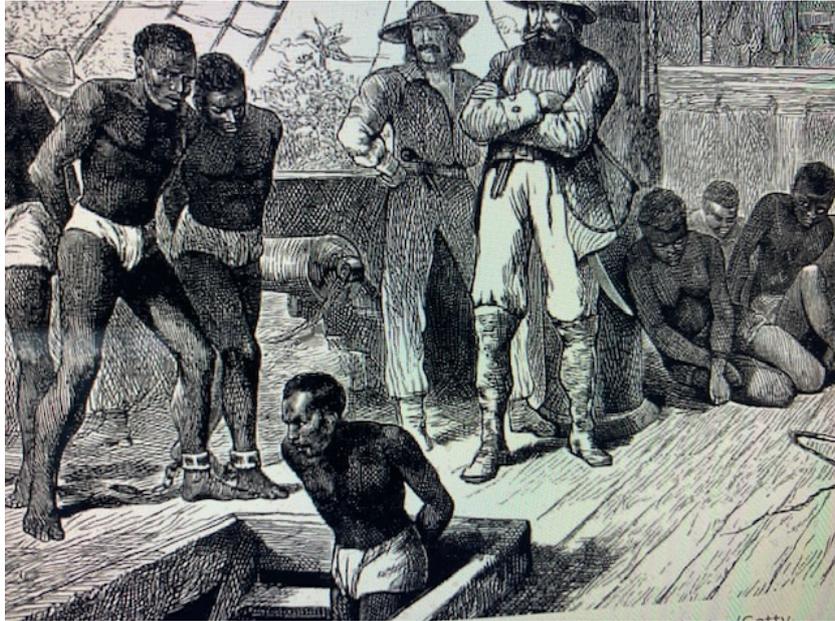


## Cottonopolis



**MANCHESTER**, for centuries a little town dominated by artisans manufacturing a variety of hand-crafted goods became the world's first industrial city on the backs of black Africans shipped to America to labour until saved by an early death in the cotton fields of Mississippi, the Carolinas, and Louisiana. The city is saturated with echoes of this terrible past – the first cotton exchange was established by Sir Oswald Mosley in 1727. By 1809 it had been rebuilt in a style referencing Greece of classical antiquity, yet another slave holding society. In our art gallery with its pediment and columns, and the Portico Library, also on Mosley Street, similar architectural bombast is on display.

By 1761 the Bridgwater Canal was opened, and resulted in dramatic falls in the price of coal shipped in from Worsley. This also made the transport of bricks and iron much cheaper and eventually made steam

power affordable. From the opening of the first steam-powered mill in 1781 to the building of the first passenger railway station in 1830, the money flooded in from the exploitation of slaves in sugar and cotton, and the savage exploitation of white labourers crowded into the fetid slums of the city. By the middle of the nineteenth century Manchester became a centre of warehousing, banking, and commerce, for the cotton mills of Bury, Oldham, Bolton and Rochdale, and for textile machinery manufacturers across the entire region.

Even after the abolition of slavery in the United States, the cotton produced by black sharecroppers, little more than the peons and the debt slaves of white landlords, continued to pour into the rapidly expanding industries of South Lancashire. In Manchester, vast new packing warehouses were constructed, Asia House, India House – the names tell their own story of Britain’s imperial expansion – like the monuments to Wellington and Queen Victoria in Piccadilly, or the statue of the Emperor of India, Edward VII, complete with orb and sceptre, now in spitting distance of ‘Curry Mile’ in Rusholme.

Consequently, there is simply no way of severing our present from this past. We could rename all the streets and smart warehouse apartment blocks, we could tear down all the statues of slave-holding imperialist bastards, we could hack off the inscription to the King Emperor, “of lands beyond the seas”, on the Town Hall extension, and smash the plaster casts of the Elgin Marbles that festoon the walls of our art gallery’s atrium. We could even uproot the cotton flower fountain in St Ann’s Square. After we’d done all this our city would still be a place of audacious inventions from the Trade Union Congress to the splitting of the atom and the invention of carbonated water. A centre of struggle for the manhood suffrage, and of votes for women.

Manchester is a city rich in struggle and innovation, a place forged from the exploitation of India and the Empire; a place built of the backs of white labourers

and the oppression of black people, both enslaved and free. It will remain so, whether we engage in iconoclasm, smashing statues, removing Pre-Raphaelite paintings of sexy girls (and a fit lad) from our gallery walls, or renaming streets and buildings. Our history cannot be edited; our past is both wretched and brilliant, rather like the stately homes financed by the sugar slavery of the Caribbean that litter the English countryside.

It was Oliver Cromwell that grabbed Jamaica for the English merchants and planters. It is Oliver Cromwell who stands on a pedestal in front of the Medieval Hall attached to the Palace of Westminster embellished in high gothic, avowedly Christian style, by Charles Barry and Augustus Pugin. Cromwell, the military commander and Lord High Protector of the English republic in the middle of the seventeenth century was, apart from conquering Jamaica, the man who carried out unforgettable massacres of Roman Catholic men, women, and children, in Ireland, and made an important contribution to the establishment of constitutional monarchy by chopping off the head of Charles Stuart.

History is so bloody confusing. Not far from Cromwell's statue, stands Winston Churchill, on the corner of Parliament Square. Here is the man who messed up a great deal, made decisions that resulted in the death of tens of thousands of seaman and soldiers from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Fjords of Norway. What's more he underwrote fiscal and trade policies in Bengal which, after the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, resulted in three or four million dead in the Bengal Famine. And yet, when the bulk of the oligarchy that ran Britain wanted to seek terms of surrender with Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler in 1940, the old racist aristocrat, imperialist *par excellence*, Winston Spencer Churchill, with the help of the Labour Party, rallied the British people to outright resistance to fascism with his fighting talk.

I have no doubt that Edward Colston, of Bristol, was a "wise and virtuous" man who shipped black men

and women, from the coast of West Africa and sold them into perpetual bondage in the Caribbean and North America. I have no doubt that he believed that blacks were not capable of reasoning, or deserving of liberty like white Christian men, because I'm sure that he believed that black people were less than fully human.

There is little doubt that some, although not many of Colston's contemporaries, in the last years of the seventeenth century, and the first two decades of the eighteenth, would have hotly contested his justification of slavery. Although Colston would be long-dead before opposition to black bondage became a *cause celebre* in English religious circles. There can be no rational defence of this man or of his views, but it is essential not to bury the history in which such things were believed, and such things were possible. Nor should we forget the Bristol of high imperialism, the Bristol of 1895, that decided to honour Edward Colston with a bronze statue, and a plaque with its insulting inscription to the "virtuous and wise" dealer in black slaves.

Iconoclasm is often meaningful in revolutionary situations, one has only to think of the bones of revered clergy scattered down the steps of Spanish churches in the 1936, or of jubilant crowds tearing down the effigy of Josef Stalin in Budapest in 1956. In such contexts the iconoclasm resulted from revolutionary exuberance and a determination to defeat the powers that be. In Bristol, however, there is no revolution, there is no revolutionary movement celebrating a frontal battle to defeat racial oppression in the city. On the contrary, the toppling of the bronze of Edward Colston is akin to an internet meme, not a revolutionary act. It was a symbolic act symbolising the absence of a meaningful struggle against the oppression of black people in Britain.

Similarly, I'm sure that the civic authorities in Belgium engaged in removing statues of Leopold II, King of the Belgians, and brutal ruler of the Congo, are not thinking much about the treatment of black people

in Brussels, or the welfare of the benighted millions in today's Democratic Republic of the Congo. Promoting feelings of white guilt, and posturing about the past, will alter nothing in Belgium, Holland, France, Italy, Spain, or Portugal. Changing the names of streets and tearing down statues cannot change history, and cannot alter the present.

I see, London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, is running to catch up with all the other poseurs; he's even talking about removing the statue of Robert Milligan, "a noted slave holder", which graces the West India Docks on the Thames (If he was an ancestor of mine I'm afraid the family had fallen into the working class by the time I was born!).

I remember some years ago I had to catch a bus into London's West End very early in the morning, and being astonished to find myself the only white person on board. The other passengers were all black, pouring into the City and the West End to clean the offices and shops. We all know that discrimination, poor education, low wages, and bad housing, is the lot of many black people in Britain. We also know that the police are far more likely to stop and search young black men than whites in the streets; and from time to time, to kill them 'inadvertently' in bungled arrests and in the cells of police stations. The oppression of black people in this country is not new, nor is not a secret. It is tied into the very fabric, of the culture and institutions of our country.

The marvellous and vast Black Lives Matter demonstrations of recent days, are a welcome outburst in the midst of the pandemic lockdown, and perhaps presage a radical change of tone and momentum in the struggle to end racial oppression. But let us not fool ourselves that iconoclasm can get one black girl into university, or one black lad into a decent job, or one black family into a good house, or save one black man from being brutalised by the police. Only a movement that focuses on the day-to-day struggles of black people for a decent shout can do that.