

Why Do We Value Cultural Heritage?

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**WHY DO WE VALUE CULTURAL
HERITAGE?**

Neil MacGregor

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

—Joan Didion

... because being American is more than a pride we inherit.

It's the past we step into, and how we repair it.

—Amanda Gorman

This is essentially a book about things. Things from the past, usually the distant past, and what may and should be done to prevent their destruction. The words used to describe those things—“cultural heritage”—are of course a metaphor, carrying over the European legal idea of ownership and inheritance from the private or family sphere into the public domain. And like all metaphors, it is helpful only to a certain point. This chapter seeks to explore the limits of that metaphor in helping us understand the creation and destruction of cultural heritage and in achieving our aim—the purpose of this book—to prevent or limit its loss.

All cultural heritage is in large measure intangible: the most important aspect of physical cultural heritage is usually less the thing itself than the narrative which communities, local or global, choose to attach to it. That explains why it is most in danger when that community narrative changes, or when one object becomes the focus of conflicting narratives. Although most of the intense recent debates have concerned ancient monuments in the Middle East, I shall focus on modern examples in Europe, where issues are often more sharply articulated, and motives and results are perhaps

easier to discern. We may best be able to understand why people value cultural heritage if we consider why they so often choose to destroy it.

Anthropologists contend that from the beginning of time societies have needed communal narratives in order to survive, let alone to flourish: that a shared understanding across generations of who we are and who we want to be is a prerequisite for the continuing success of a community. The problems with which this book is concerned arise when those life-sustaining stories which communities tell themselves crystallize in vulnerable, valuable things.

In the context of European family law, heritage—what can be inherited—is predominantly concerned with things of economic value, even if, like a copyright or a public office, they themselves are abstract. Normally heirs enjoy the right to make whatever use of those things they please: to exploit them financially, to wear them out by use, to alter them, and even willfully to destroy them if they think that advances their purpose—as Cleopatra famously dissolved her magnificent pearl to impress Mark Antony, and as Prospero will drown his magic book to usher in a new, better order for his duchy at the end of *The Tempest*. In this understanding of heritage, there may be disputes about who is the rightful heir: there is little argument about what they may choose to do with their inheritance.

But cultural heritage is clearly different. It is not principally about the economic value of the object, but about the meaning attributed to it. And just as meaning cannot belong to only one person, but presupposes a consensus and a community of language, so ownership of cultural heritage is also always multiple. It posits a community of shared assumptions, people who see embodied in a physical object the story that they choose to tell about themselves, usually one that sets their current existence in a context going far beyond the span of a single human life. And that is what transforms some—but only some—antiquities into cultural heritage.

A powerful demonstration of this was the response of the vigorously secular French state to the burning of the Catholic cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris in 2019. The appeal to the public to contribute funds for rebuilding did not focus on the cathedral's medieval structure (much of the external stonework is modern restoration) or on its aesthetic qualities—many would argue that Chartres, Amiens, or Beauvais rank higher on that score. Even less was it based on the building's prime purpose as a place of Christian worship. The slogan on the appeal posters asked people to donate simply, "*Parce que c'est Notre Dame,*" part of *our* story as French citizens, part of what it means to be French, in the past and in the future. What was at stake was not so much the building itself as the meaning projected on to it by most of the population—a meaning derived as much from Victor Hugo's novel *Notre Dame de Paris* and the films it inspired as by the great events of French history that have taken place there over centuries. The cathedral's significance as "cultural heritage," a potent emblem of national survival and renewal, was in large measure the result of fiction and popular imagining, and entirely separable from the religious purpose for which it had been built and maintained.

The essential value of material cultural heritage is not that it provides physical evidence for the investigation of the past (as all archaeological sites do), nor even that it is of great beauty, but that it underpins the *intangible* heritage of a community, substantiating the story—or myth—by which they now live, the story which sustains and shapes their present. It matters little if the thing is “authentic,” provided the narrative still energizes the community.

By the same token, a powerful, sustaining story will often demand the elimination of objects which appear to contradict it. When the group’s narrative changes—as at moments of religious conversion or political revolution—the consequences for the material cultural heritage which carried the old narrative are always profound, and often calamitous. It cannot be otherwise—whether in the iconoclasm of the Protestant Reformation, of the French or Russian revolutions, or of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Their very destruction speaks to the power of those symbols to perpetuate the inherited worldview, and so to impede the building of a new society. Only very occasionally can you put new stories into old monuments.¹

This book came into existence between two episodes of cultural destruction which caught the public’s attention with rare intensity. It was conceived in the aftermath of the worldwide revulsion against the destruction of monuments of ancient civilizations and living religions across the Middle East in the armed conflicts that followed the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. It is being published in the wake of the forcible destruction or removal of public statues by generally peaceful crowds in Africa, Europe, and the Americas in the summer of 2020, especially following the killing of George Floyd by a police officer kneeling on his neck in Minneapolis on 25 May.

The years since 2003, scarred by many cultural losses, have led to a more informed and lively debate than ever before about the significance of the sites and monuments of the past; about the extent to which they may properly be considered the concern of all humanity rather than a particular group; and—critically—about who has the right or duty to protect them, and whether anyone, either external enemy or internal reformer, has the right to destroy them.

This last point—the right to destroy—was at the center of the widely publicized removal on 7 June 2020 of the statue in Bristol, England, of Edward Colston, a seventeenth-century slave trader and an outstandingly generous benefactor to the city.² Inaugurated in 1895 and bearing an inscription stating that it was “erected by the citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city,” the statue was without question part of the urban fabric of Bristol, a civic celebration of a significant philanthropist. It was a work of considerable artistic merit, but since the 1990s had been the object of vociferous public controversy: should a city (especially one now home to a sizeable Afro-Caribbean population suffering high and entrenched levels of deprivation) honor so unequivocally a benefactor whose wealth derived from

exploitation of the enslaved? Campaigners argued that the statue as it stood perpetuated the cancer of racial injustice from which the city, and the whole United Kingdom, still suffered. They urged that at the very least the inscription on the plinth with its words “most virtuous and wise” should be altered to acknowledge the inhumanity of Colston’s business activities.

After many years of inconclusive discussions with the city council and other local bodies, protesters taking part in a peaceful Black Lives Matter demonstration in June 2020 took matters into their own hands, dragging the statue from its plinth, and—in an eloquent gesture—kneeling on its neck for eight minutes and forty-six seconds (the time it had taken for George Floyd to die). Then the graffiti-splattered image of the slave-trader was dragged along the street and thrown into the harbor. It was powerful street theater, all the more effective for being apparently unplanned. The pictures were seen and discussed around the world. The police were present, but, in the light of the mood of the crowd, decided not to intervene. The police superintendent explained: “whilst I’m disappointed people would damage one of our statues, I do understand why it happened: it is very symbolic.” Even for the police, this was a rational (if regrettable) act of cultural destruction.

Polling suggested that public opinion in Bristol supported the police decision, was strongly in favor of the statue’s removal, but was more divided about the process by which this should have been accomplished. Many felt that a negotiated solution had been frustrated by unacceptably long delay, and most believed there should be no criminal prosecution. The mayor was reluctant to condemn. The Crown Prosecution Service eventually pressed four charges of criminal damage. The paint-smearing statue was recovered from the harbor and taken into the care of the Bristol Museum.

As cultural destruction goes, the daubing, dragging, and dunking of the Colston statue is a small-scale, provincial affair, but it highlights some fundamental issues. The Bristol of 1895 that put up the statue has since been transformed by immigration. The symbolic meaning of this statue (the aspect underlined by the superintendent of police) was now in open contradiction to the self-understanding and aspirations of many of its citizens, far beyond the Black community. What was at issue was not the statue as an artifact in itself, but the narrative which it appeared to embody and condone, of suffering tolerated and justice denied. In large measure, the Bristol debates echoed the arguments in the southern United States about monuments honoring Confederate leaders, many of which were also removed or destroyed in the summer of 2020.

Colston’s statue was unquestionably the cultural heritage of a certain Bristol. And that was precisely the problem: because for a different Bristol that cultural heritage had come to be seen as a toxic inheritance which had to be repudiated, whose very existence now inhibited the building of a more just society. Its presence at the heart of the city seemed to torpedo the story which many thought Bristol now needed to tell itself in order to flourish as a community.

That leads to an uncomfortable question: has a community the right—perhaps even the duty—to destroy those parts of its heritage which undermine its ethical foundations, which it believes prevent it from becoming what it wants to be? There are, for example, medieval art-works in Germany that even today might, if exhibited, encourage anti-Jewish sentiment and behavior. If the community which owned such works decided it would be wiser to destroy them, who would have the right to stop them?

The answer to that last question, as far as Bristol was concerned, was given firmly by the British government's secretary of state for communities, Robert Jenrick. Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, he declared that statues could not be removed “on a whim or at the behest of a baying mob,”³ apparently overlooking the fact that such actions are hardly ever the result of a whim, but generally reflect a long and deep shift in the way that people want to shape their society. Writing further on the government's main website, Jenrick continued: “We cannot—and should not—now try to edit or censor our past.”⁴ (He did not explain who that “we” and that “our” encompass.) “That is why I am changing the law to protect historic monuments.” Such a change in the law cannot of course be decreed by a minister, but requires the approval of Parliament. If that consent is obtained, in the future any removal of a statue (or even changing the inscription describing Colston as “one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city”) would require a formal application for planning permission—a process which would ensure that the secretary of state has the power to overrule the decision of a local authority and make the ultimate determination. Moving a statue and changing the narrative of a city are ultimately not to be matters for that city: public narratives anywhere in England are the concern of, and so, it is suggested, should be under the control of, central government.

Jenrick's proposal is a striking demonstration of the importance which cultural heritage has everywhere assumed in political discourse. The government in London wishes to decide how “our” past is to be edited or censored. It will determine, in an increasingly diverse society which now embraces many different traditions, what “our” past is and how it may be presented or changed.

It is particularly revealing that this statement came from the communities secretary, not the culture or education secretary, underlining the fact that the central concern here is not in fact cultural, but societal. In the Colston controversy there was much talk about “history,” but the question is surely not really about history, about what a society *was*, but about what it wants to become, and whether preserving a particular statue, or a piece of cultural heritage in the wider sense, can help prolong a societal status quo. By the same logic, destruction of long revered sites and monuments is often deemed essential by religious reformers and political revolutionaries, in order to clear the path to the new order. Cultural heritage is about the future.

Economic theory is familiar with Schumpeter's notion of creative destruction—that some businesses need to die so that those which better serve the public need can be born and flourish. Is there a need for a comparable, equally uncomfortable theory in the

field of cultural heritage? The reason why we so value material cultural heritage is precisely the reason why to so many it seems necessary—and reasonable—to eliminate it.

That need to eliminate evidence of the past has rarely been more acute than in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the subsequent withdrawal of its occupying forces. For decades, official histories, state ceremonies, and large-scale public monuments had celebrated the long-agreed (or perhaps more accurately, long-imposed) story of the courageous Soviet soldiers fighting the Nazis with huge loss of life, who came in 1944 as welcome liberators, and then stayed on as generous brothers in the joint struggle to build a democratic socialist society.

But in the newly independent countries emerging from Soviet-supported dictatorships after 1990, nation-building required a different story. Complex memories of collaboration and resistance during the fifty years of Nazi or Soviet occupation had to be recovered and adjudicated, then rearranged and given formal expression by new political leaders. Each of the reestablished republics painstakingly constructed its new national narrative, usually based on a selective reading of distant and recent history, which would allow it to build a cohesive independent state, both at ease with itself and distinct from its neighbors. But there was a major problem: in streets and public squares everywhere, existing monuments contradicted—sometimes entirely negated—that new and necessary history, which had been designed to sustain the community.

In the space of a few decades, the cultural heritage of postwar Eastern Europe was in consequence reshaped: songs, ceremonies, and national legends were reconfigured, and everywhere statues and monuments from the Soviet era were destroyed, buried, hidden, relocated, or presented in a new context—this time as memorials of oppression. Individual cases frequently led to intense argument, and sometimes violence.

One of the many Soviet war memorials to become the focus of bitter dispute, the *Bronze Soldier of Tallinn*, is a particularly telling example. Estonians of ethnic Russian origin simply refused to accept a new national narrative in which resistance to the Soviet occupier was privileged and celebrated.⁵ For Russo-Estonians, the statue honoring the sacrifices made by their Russian comrades, long a landmark in the center of Tallinn, was a key part of their cultural heritage and their communal identity. For ethnic Estonians on the other hand, it was a dangerously corrosive lie. The statue has now been re-sited in a less prominent location. But that may be only a temporary solution to a problem which seems at the moment intractable.

In North America and Europe (though not of course in Russia) there has generally been a tolerant acceptance that damage to significant cultural heritage was a price which probably had to be paid if the post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe were to become what they had chosen to be. Yet this contrasts sharply with the general international condemnation in the same period of damage caused in attempts to build a

society based on a purified reading of Islam—whether Saudi Arabia’s destruction of buildings in Mecca connected to the life of the Prophet, or the more public purgings of the Taliban and ISIS. As the *Bronze Soldier* makes clear, we all value the cultural heritage which supports our understanding of history—and our preferred options for the future.

It would be misleading to see the years since 1990 in Eastern Europe as exclusively ones of cultural heritage lost. In parallel with the elimination of one inheritance has gone the restoration or creation of another. The new communal narratives (at least the ones selected by the governments) are seen as an essential part of building a strong state, to be reinforced by changes in school curricula and supported by a new material cultural heritage in which those narratives are to be made publicly visible. So new monuments, buildings, and museums have taken the place of the old, to promote a story of long national struggle and ultimate, triumphant survival.

The aim of rebuilding a sense of national confidence is exactly the ambition articulated for the United States in Amanda Gorman’s poem at the inauguration of President Biden. “Repairing” the past which Eastern Europeans stepped into and strengthening their inherited pride in national identity has taken many forms. I want to conclude with three examples. Since 1945 the royal palaces in Warsaw, Vilnius, and Berlin, each of which had been razed to the ground specifically to eliminate national memories in calculated acts of deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, have all been rebuilt, and in each case been invested with recovered—or sometimes entirely new—meaning.

One of the first steps in the Nazi attempt to destroy the Polish nation was the demolition, ordered by Hitler in October 1939, of the eighteenth-century Royal Castle in Warsaw. At the heart of the city, the residence of the last king had long been a key symbol of Poland as an independent European power. After the crushing of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, the German army blew up everything of the castle that remained, to make way for a *Volkshalle* or people’s hall in what was planned to be a totally German city. Nazi mass atrocity and the destruction of cultural heritage marched in step—coordinated elements in the intended cultural genocide of Poland.

In 1949, in spite of the huge economic challenges facing postwar Poland, the Polish parliament resolved to rebuild the Royal Castle, exactly as it had been in 1939, faithfully following photographs and drawings. The work continued for decades, and today visitors are confronted with a meticulously executed, utterly convincing facsimile, both inside and out. There must be some walking through the state rooms today who do not realize that this is *not* the original eighteenth-century palace, the showpiece of the Polish Enlightenment, but a totally modern building.

History here has been denied and reversed. It is as though nothing at all happened on this site between 1939 and 1945. But one thing has most definitely happened: Polish

survival has been affirmed, and since 1990 and the subsequent ending of all military cooperation with Russia, the castle has become more than ever a symbolic declaration that no foreign invader or occupier can destroy the Polish people or crush their spirit. As a piece of cultural heritage, sustaining the central national story, the significance of the building demolished by Hitler has been completely recovered. The Royal Castle is without question more effective in its mythic function now than it was before its destruction. The old meaning has been successfully transferred to a new building. The value of the restored castle as a source of information about the eighteenth century is negligible. What it says about Poland's view of itself today is profound. In some circumstances, cultural heritage can be recovered, even from total destruction.

The Renaissance Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania in Vilnius was the seat of the rulers of the Lithuanian–Polish Commonwealth, which around 1600 stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. The building was razed to the ground by the Russians in 1801, after their annexation of Lithuania in the final partition of Poland. As in Warsaw, the invaders' aim was to remove a key symbol of national identity in a country that was henceforth to be—in this case—Russian. And, apart from a brief period between 1918 and 1939, Russian it remained until Lithuania declared its independence in 1990.

The decision to reconstruct the Palace in Vilnius was more complicated than in Warsaw, as much less was known about the building's original appearance, especially its interiors. The new palace, formally inaugurated in 2018 to mark the centenary of Lithuania's brief interwar independence from Russia, is a scholarly approximation, replicating what was thought to have been there in the sixteenth century, and it does not pretend to be more than a well-founded, partly imaginative reconstruction. The style of that reconstruction, however, and the selection of objects displayed inside the building, are more important than strict historical truth. Together, they present a view of a court and a society with strong links to the German-speaking lands and closely engaged with Rome and the Italian Renaissance. The message they carry is unequivocal and easily legible: that Lithuania has long been part of the Western European cultural tradition and owes little of significance to Russia, or indeed to Poland.

However questionable as history, this is the foundation narrative of the new Lithuania, now a member of the European Union and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a country looking resolutely west—and that story can be seen and visited here. A powerful piece of cultural heritage has been created, very successfully as far as can be judged, and the national narrative is now securely anchored in a new “sixteenth-century” building.

Finally, Berlin. Built around 1700, the Berlin Palace, seat of the king of Prussia and German kaiser, was the heart of the Hohenzollern capital, the baroque culmination of the grand avenue Unter den Linden. Though damaged by bombing in World War II, it

could well have been completely restored after 1945, and indeed some parts of it were. But in 1950 the government of the German Democratic Republic decided to blow it up. To them the palace was the supreme expression of Prussian cultural heritage, a symbol of hierarchy, militarism, and imperialist aggression, a building which could have no place in a new German state based on the teachings of Marx and Engels. The state of Prussia had been abolished; now its rulers' palace must follow it into oblivion. Unlike Warsaw or Vilnius, this destruction was—significantly—carried out not by an occupying enemy power, but by Germans themselves: the new East German state, seeking to differentiate itself from its Western, capitalist, and allegedly imperialist counterpart, the Federal Republic. One strand of German tradition and self-understanding was repudiating another by dynamiting their shared past.

In the early 2000s, with Berlin again the capital of a united Germany, the federal parliament, the Bundestag, took the decision to rebuild the Royal Palace, reconstructing as accurately as possible the original three baroque façades. But although reconstructed, this was in no sense to *be* a royal palace—there was no ambition here to return to a proud national past, real or imagined, on the lines of Warsaw or Vilnius. Rather, the purpose was to show how different Germany had now become from its previous self. Instead of imperial reception rooms, or glorious periods of German national history, the visitors will find on the inside the African, American, Asian, and Oceanian collections of the Berlin museums. This reconstructed palace is intended to carry a message quite different from the original: it is to embody the narrative of a new, peaceful Germany, turning its back on its past—respectful of other traditions, welcoming debate, and hospitably open to the cultures of the world beyond Europe. And to make the point absolutely clear, it will not be called the Royal Palace, but the Humboldt Forum, in honor of the two scholarly brothers, Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt, who in the first half of the nineteenth century changed Europe's understanding of the ecology and cultures of the world.⁶

As the building only recently opened to the public, it is too soon to say how successful it will be in giving visible—and visitable—form to this new German self-understanding. The old Royal Palace was never held high in public affection, so there is little emotional connection to build on. Some see the building as a dangerous exercise in escapist nostalgia. Critics are concerned that the Roman architecture of the reconstructed façades is in irresolvable conflict with the non-European contents: the sculpted military trophies and triumphal arch motifs might be thought to endorse the colonial conquest by which parts of the African and Oceanian collection were acquired. While it may in time become a much loved building, it is not clear that it will be able to carry any coherent symbolic charge, even less to embody an ennobling narrative of national identity. It will take time before we can say whether this is merely a new museum, beset by controversy, or whether a powerful piece of cultural heritage, bearing a meaning beyond itself, has been brought into being.

From these different examples, a few conclusions may be drawn. There is no doubt that when a communal myth or narrative can be embedded in a monument, that combination has a rare power to strengthen and sustain a society's belief in itself. It is that embedding of meaning that makes an archaeological site, a building, or a monument into a piece of cultural heritage. And, encouragingly for such objects, as the Eastern European examples show, destruction is not necessarily the end of the story. Much historical information may be irrecoverably lost when cultural sites perish, but the strengthening, vivifying role that they play in building community can on occasion be just as effectively performed by a reconstruction or a replacement, perhaps even more powerfully because they were once destroyed. They can live again.

Epigraphs: Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 11; Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb," read at the inauguration of US president Joseph R. Biden, Washington, DC, 20 January 2021.

SUGGESTED READINGS

International Bar Association, *Contested Histories in Public Spaces: Principles, Processes, Best Practices* (London: International Bar Association, 2021), <https://ibanet.org/contested-histories>.

Neil MacGregor, *À monde nouveau, nouveaux musées: Les musées, les monuments et la communauté réinventée* (Paris: Musée du Louvre / Hazam, 2021).

Andrea Theissen, ed., *Enthüllt: Berlin und seine Denkmäler* (Berlin: Stadtgeschichtliches Museum Spandau, 2017).

Rodolphe Tolbiac, *La destruction des statues de Victor Schoelcher en Martinique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2020).

Marjorie Trusted and Joanna Barnes, eds., *Toppling Statues: Papers from the 2020 PSSA Webinar Co-hosted by The Burlington Magazine* (Watford, UK: Public Statues and Sculpture Association, 2021).

NOTES

1. Kavita Singh gives a memorable example of the Hazara inhabitants of the Bamiyan valley, who had attached a completely new meaning to the colossal Buddhas, transforming them into a legendary hero and his princess. See Kavita Singh, commentary in "Social and Cultural Costs," *Cultural Heritage under Siege: Laying the Foundation for a Legal and Political Framework to Protect Cultural Heritage at Risk in Zones of Armed Conflict*, ed. James Cuno and Thomas G. Weiss, Occasional Papers in Cultural Heritage Policy no. 4 (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2020), 52, <https://www.getty.edu/publications/occasional-papers-4>.
2. For a full discussion of the disputes around the Colston statue, see International Bar Association, *Contested Histories in Public Spaces: Principles, Processes, Best Practices* (London: International Bar Association, February 2021), 19–50.
3. Robert Jenrick, "We Will Save Britain's Statues from the Woke Militants," *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 January 2021.
4. Government of the United Kingdom, "New Legal Protection for England's Heritage," press release, 17 January 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage>.

5. See International Bar Association, *Contested Histories in Public Spaces*, 147–74.
6. For a full account of the evolving ideas for the reconstruction of the Berliner Schloss and its use, see Peter-Klaus Schuster and Horst Bredekamp, *Das Humboldt-Forum: Die Wiedergewinnung einer Idee* (Berlin: Wagenbach Klaus, 2016).