New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Contentious Statues*

For the most part, the statues that decorate our streets and squares are ignored as we pass by with heads down, even when it isn't raining, or, if we are young, with eyes fixed on our smartphones. Sometimes who the figures looking down from the plinths are we have in any case little or no idea.

Recently, however, some students in Oxford campaigned to persuade the governing body at Oriel College to remove the statue of Cecil Rhodes that dominates the extension funded by a bequest in his will. Their campaign was unsuccessful (one alumnus, they say, threatened to cancel a colossal donation unless the statue stayed in place). Rhodes (1853-1902), who attended the college in the 1870s, helped to consolidate the policy of racial segregation in what became the Republic of South Africa; Zimbabwe was of course formerly Rhodesia; and his benefactions rest on lifelong exploitation of African peoples. Each year, eighty-three international students are selected to study at Oxford under the scholarship that bears his name.

Much more dramatically, in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 12 August last year, one person was killed during clashes between self-proclaimed white supremacists and their opponents, over removing a statue of Robert E. Lee (1807-1870), the legendary Confederate leader in the Civil War, the tragic hero of the South now unveiled as an irredeemable racist.

But not all public artworks turn out so contentious, even in hindsight. Some are challenging from the outset. In Edinburgh, for example, Helen Denerley's double-decker high giraffes, made of scrap metal, installed in 2005, rise up on the footpath at the top of Leith Walk, with the exhortatory inscription from the South African poet Roy Campbell: 'Giraffes! a People/ Who live between earth and skies/Each in his own religious steeple/ Keeping a lighthouse with his eyes'.

If that seems puzzling enough, then across the street and round the corner, outside St Mary's Metropolitan Cathedral, there is the immense clunky sculpture composed of a human foot, an ankle and an open hand — enigmatically entitled 'The Manuscript of Monte Cassino' — together constituting an allegory for pilgrimage. Inaugurated in 1991, this monument was created by the Leith-born sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005), whose father, grandfather and uncle were among the 446 Scottish-Italians drowned when *The Arandora Star*, taking them to prison in Canada, was sunk by German action.

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Just over the square, much easier to explain, a statue of Sherlock Holmes stands outside where Conan Doyle once lived. Of about one hundred monuments in Edinburgh many are war memorials. Others portray Wellington, Gladstone, Queen Victoria and suchlike eminent Brits. Famous Scots are of course well represented: Wallace and Bruce, John Knox (in the Divinity School), Walter Scott (seated in his cell-like tower), Robert Fergusson (jauntily walking along the pavement), the philosopher friends Adam Smith and David Hume (half naked in a Roman toga, though the dressiest man in Edinburgh in his day) and many others.

However, even from the upper deck of a bus one cannot make out the face of Henry Dundas properly, on the 140 ft. column in St Andrew Square, by far the most elevated statue in Edinburgh. The cost, they say, was met by contributions from officers and men of the Royal Navy: Dundas (1742-1811) had been Treasurer of the Navy. An Edinburgh lawyer who moved into politics in London Dundas played a significant part in the prosecution of the war against Napoleon and in the simultaneous expansion of British power in India. Few Scots know much about him. Nicknamed Henry the Ninth, the 'Great Tyrant', and 'The Uncrowned King of Scotland' — all quite affectionately — he ruled Scotland by patronage, never having to live there much in his heyday. In her loneliness his young wife had an affair, which she confessed, so he divorced her, seeing to it that she never saw any of their four children again. Most damningly, however, Dundas was a leader of those at Westminster delaying the abolition of slavery, though knowing it was inevitable. If ever enough of his compatriots find out what Dundas was really like perhaps his statue will be toppled from its great height.

Meanwhile, the most visited statue in Edinburgh — Greyfriars Bobby — is of a Skye terrier that supposedly spent fourteen years guarding the grave of its owner until he died himself on 14 January 1872. For sure, this faithful dog has a much better story than Viscount Melville.

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