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Myths within myths...

Edward Colston and that statue

By Roger Ball (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/contributors/roger-ball/>)

Page Details

Section: [Articles \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/) => [Written Articles \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/article_type/written-article/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/article_type/written-article/)
Projects: [Edward Colston \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/project/edward-colston/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/project/edward-colston/)
Subjects: [Race & Racism \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/category/race-racism/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/category/race-racism/), [Slavery & Resistance \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/category/slavery-resistance/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/category/slavery-resistance/)
Tags: [Arrowsmith \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/arrowsmith/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/arrowsmith/), [Colston Collection \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/colston-collection/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/colston-collection/), [Edward Colston \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/edward-colston/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/edward-colston/), [slave trade \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/slave-trade/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/slave-trade/), [statue \(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/statue/\)](https://www.brh.org.uk/site/tag/statue/)
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(<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/colston-vic-b.jpg>)

In the light of recent moves to place a 'corrective' plaque on the statue of Edward Colston in the centre of Bristol and calls for it to be removed to a museum¹

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmyHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-1

it seems the time is right to investigate the origins of this monument and the claim emblazoned on it that it was:

Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city

Looking into the history of the statue demonstrates the same myth making that has characterised the popular memory of Colston in Bristol (until very recently).



(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/fsla_a_382065_o_f0002g.gif)

Edward Colston: a Victorian re-invention

When I first became aware of Colston and the statue on the Centre 35 years ago I assumed, as many do, that it was from a similar period as the time Colston lived (1636-1721).^[2]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2)

In fact it was erected in 1895, more than 170 years after his death. The statue actually marks the high point of the reinvention of Colston as the 'father of the city' in the Victorian era. Colston was selected by Bristol's business and civic elite to be their icon from a number of historical figures who had made philanthropic donations to the city. These included, amongst others, Robert Thorne, John Whitson, Robert Aldworth, William Chester, Richard Reynolds and the Canynge family, who most Bristolians have never heard of.^[3]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-3)

For example, Reynolds, a Quaker and innovative ironmaster, gave larger sums to charities in Bristol in the early nineteenth century than Edward Colston but is largely unknown and is not memorialised in the city.

So what was special about Colston, why was he chosen and is the Colston 'we know' a real reflection of the historical figure? Spencer Jordan argues in his detailed study of Bristol elites in this period that Edward Colston should not be interpreted as:

a static eighteenth-century inheritance but rather a cultural creation whose form and meaning had distinct temporal qualities reflecting the vagaries of dominant bourgeois ethics.^[4]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-4)

Jordan's point is that the historical figure of Colston was being reinvented in the Victorian period to represent the economic, social and political perspectives of the Bristol business elite. 'Invented tradition' can be characterised as:

...a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.^[5]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-5)

Ritual commemoration, celebration and memorialisation of Edward Colston in the Victorian public domain were crucial to propagating both the elite concept of Colston and the belief that this concept was validated by long-standing tradition. So what were the ideas underlying this reinvention? Jordan argues that the reimagined 'Victorian' Colston legitimised:

...two broad aspects of the developing bourgeois value system: first, the ascendancy of individualism, both morally and economically, as a political system; and second, the right of limited but sustained private relief organised and distributed by those considered the city's moral and economic leaders. The ability to depict Colston as both '**merchant prince**' and '**moral saint**' was thus central to the perpetuation of the tradition throughout the nineteenth century.^[6]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-6)

The organisations used for propagating this Victorian version of Colston were primarily the four charitable societies; the Dolphin, Anchor, Grateful and Colston (or Parent) Societies. Leading members of these associations were tied closely to other organisations of the Bristol elite such as the Society of Merchant Venturers and:

...by the mid-nineteenth century a Colston presidency was considered to be a particularly high-status position, attracting members from Bristol's leading families to the degree that some established transient dynasties, such as the Wills in the Anchor, Miles in the Dolphin and the Hare and Lucas families in the Parent.^[7]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-7

The key period of ritual for the four societies was the 1st-13th November each year, which was effectively a drawn out public fund-raising activity culminating in Colston's birthday on the thirteenth. 'Colston Day' as it was touted, consisted of elaborate ceremonial processions, worship and banquets which grew increasingly more stylised and complex as the century wore on. Jordan provides a description at the mid-century:

With the church bells ringing around the city events began early in the morning when both the committees of the Dolphin and Grateful met separately for breakfast...While the latter was an intimate affair, the former included 100 young apprentices who, after breakfasting together, formed a procession carrying banners and wands...The procession wended its way through 'great crowds' to All Saints' Church where the banners were placed around the tomb of Edward Colston, profusely decorated with flowers. After breakfasting, the Dolphin committee was met by apprentices and boys from Colston and Temple Colston Schools. A procession was formed with banners and bands which, after marching around College Green, continued to the cathedral for a service. The boys and apprentices then marched to the Exchange where each was presented with a new shilling and each apprentice three shillings and sixpence. Members of the Parent met at the Colston Rooms in mid-afternoon and then, attended by boys and girls from Blue Coat School, [Queen Elizabeth's Hospital] walked to St. Mary, Redcliffe Church. The Anchor, with its nonconformist associations, failed to generate any tradition of divine service, only meeting for a dinner in the evening.^[8]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-8

The evening dinners organised by the various societies which marked the end of 'Colston Day' became important national events by the end of the century, attracting leading politicians including a Prime Minister. They were characterised by speeches reflecting the political flavours of each society and involved numerous toasts, including to "the pious memory of Edward Colston".^[9]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-9

From the mid-century on 'Colston Day' events were increasingly reported in the burgeoning local press, pushing the 'cult of Colston' to a wider audience. Jordan explains:

The telling and retelling of the Colston myth each year in the dailies took on an obsessive attention to historic detail...the parades and dinners...received careful elucidation, including the dutiful recantation of speeches and the names of those attending. Poems, songs and cartoons...all became part of the annual commemoration.^[10]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-10

In this way, over several generations, the myths of the 'cult' that portrayed Colston as both 'merchant prince' and 'moral saint' penetrated the Bristol psyche and were fixed, to varying degree, in much of the populace. As part of this reinvention, strange proto-religious stories about Colston were propagated. It was said that when his body was disinterred in 1843, more than a hundred years after his death, it was miraculously preserved.^[11]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-11

Rumours abounded that samples of Colston's hair and nails had been secretly conserved and were worshipped by the Society of Merchant Venturers in the Merchants Hall, like medieval religious relics.^[12]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-12

Others claimed that Colston's philanthropy was due to a religious epiphany, a 'road to Damascus' moment that had turned his life towards giving rather than profiteering.^[13]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCIZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-13

With these implicit references to St Paul and Jesus along with his explicit representation as the 'Good Samaritan' created in Bristol churches, the reinvented Edward Colston covered most of the Christian bases. Added to this was the 'miracle' of a Dolphin supposedly saving one of Colston's ships in a storm by plugging a hole in the hull with its body. However, the unpalatable aspects of Colston's history, such as his leading role as an organiser and profiteer in the slave trade and his religious and political bigotry, remained hidden or were ignored.

Charidy ... or something else?

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this whole Victorian charade is the fact that the much vaunted charitable efforts of the Colston Societies were largely superficial. For example, in 1884, the combined contribution of all the Colston related charities made up only 1.5 per cent of the total cost of relieving the poor that year. Not only was the amount collected fairly insignificant, despite all the fanfare, but it was also distributed in a badly organised and arbitrary manner. A report into the condition of the poor in Bristol published in 1885 directly criticised the Colston Societies in stating:

The higher interest of charity will not be served, it appears to the Committee, until... the total sum collected by the three societies is distributed on some general and well-conceived plan.^[14]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-14

This kind of criticism of private philanthropy grew in the late nineteenth century as it became clear that the charitable donations provided at the whim of a few rich 'do-gooders' could not deal with the widespread, chronic and abject poverty that characterised the Victorian era. However, public displays of charity by business and civic elites had another, perhaps more important, role than merely poor relief. Jordan notes that:

Although the fiscal contribution of the Colston Societies was superficial this should not lead one to understate the importance of philanthropy as ritual in the maintenance of urban power structures.^[15]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-15

Thus the ritual and ideological aspects of the 'cult of Colston' may have far outweighed the actual practical benefits to the 'poor'.

The relationships of elite patronage and power that were made explicit in the Victorian celebrations of Colston were to be severely challenged in the late 1880s and 1890s as Bristol entered a period of serious labour unrest. Continuing disenfranchisement, along with more than a decade of economic recession, low wages, bad working conditions and lack of Unionisation, had all hit the Bristolian working class hard. In 1889-90 there was a massive increase in the membership of the new 'General Unions', including many women workers. This was paralleled by a devastating strike wave which severely affected several of the leading businesses in the city. However, the business and political elite united, Tory and Liberal alike, to resist the demands of the workers and to use the local state to suppress the strikes and protests. Two years later the bosses went on the offensive against the Unions and another wave of strikes broke out. This led the deployment by the 'city fathers' of Cavalry and Police units to break up a mass demonstration of tens of thousands of the strikers and their supporters in December 1892. Many people were injured by the military intervention in what became known locally as 'Black Friday'.^[16]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-16

In this environment of open class warfare the relations of patronage and authority, which the business and civic elite had enjoyed in part through the rituals of the 'cult of Colston', were being seriously challenged. Bristolian working class leaders were embracing socialism, standing in elections independent of the two main parties and speaking publicly about the formation of a 'labour party' to represent working people. The city may have been riven on the basis of class for centuries but now it was explicitly divided in the political arena, an area which had hitherto been dominated by the elite. For some well-to-do businessmen and politicians the solution to this problem was to rediscover the heyday of (supposed) civic unity in the 1860s and 1870s predicated on the popularity of the 'city father' Edward Colston.

That statue

Despite the claims on the statue of Edward Colston and local myth, the idea of having a statue of to memorialise the 'great benefactor' did not come from popular demands by the "citizens of Bristol". It was in fact the brainchild of one person, James Arrowsmith, president of the Liberal dominated Anchor Society. Arrowsmith was a wealthy businessman who owned the largest printing and publishing company in the city. In a speech to the Colston Fraternal Society in October 1893 he proposed that a statue should be erected and in March of the following year a fund raising committee was set up by officials of the four Colston commemoration societies, with Arrowsmith as honorary secretary.^[17]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-17

The funding drive was a struggle from the very beginning. Despite issuing letters asking for donations from the combined membership of 1,550 of the four Colston societies, the first subscription list, announced in April 1894, raised only £201, less than a quarter of the total amount required.^[18]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-18

A second round of subscriptions in June doubled this to a £407, still well short of the £1,000 required. It was noted that "the members of the Colston societies were not too eager in the matter" so at this point the committee issued a public statement

inviting "Citizens generally...to subscribe to the fund".^[19]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-1

However, this seems to have been a complete flop, as by October of that year hardly any more money had been collected.^[20]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2

As a result of the disappointing showing amongst the Colston societies and the general public, in July 1894 a bitter letter of complaint (probably written by Arrowsmith himself) under the pseudonym *In Statu Quo* appeared in the *Bristol Mercury*. The majority of this letter is reproduced below:

Sir – We hear and read a great deal now about statueless Bristol, but we hope this will not be for long, as we are promised a very handsome monument in memory of Burke, in addition to which a fund has been started for the creation of a statue of Edward Colston, but it is very unsatisfactory to learn that the response to the appeal has not been by any means as liberal as it should have been; neither, indeed, has it come up to the amount that Bristolians usually give to ordinary movements.

In November each year we make a great blaze in honour of our greatest philanthropist, the leading statesmen of the day pay us a visit to do homage to the Bristol celebrity, and the press of the United Kingdom record at that period of the year the magnanimity of the citizens of Bristol in perpetuating Colston's memory by lavish contributions to the aged and infirm and for the education of the rising generation, but when a request is made to them to put their hands in their pockets for a donation towards a statue towards one who was so good and great, what response is there? None whatever worthy of the old port of Bristol.

There is enough wealth in Bristol to erect 400 statues, if necessary, without so much begging and praying...Why two or three gentlemen are always saddled with the making up of deficiencies, whether for church, chapel, hospital, or school, I cannot comprehend; but it is the same old tale of working a willing horse to death.^[21]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-21

This letter was followed in September 1894 by one penned by a C. R. Pendock who noted that "the chance of subscribing to the statue had now been thrown open to Colston [school] boys, past and present". Pendock offered to organise a reunion event to raise money for "commemorating the princely benevolence of our glorious old founder".^[22]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2

However, it appears this gesture did not materialise and, if it did, it had little impact on the monies raised.

The material aspect of the project was well advanced by the end of 1894, with the final design for the bronze statue by John Cassidy chosen from 23 entrants, and plans in place to unveil the monument on Colston Day in November the following year. However, the fund-raising had ground to an ignominious halt despite the appeals to the wealthy of Bristol, remonstrating letters and opening the subscriptions up to the wider public. In fact it appears very little money was pledged to the project in the latter part of 1894 and the first few months of 1895, with the fund stubbornly stuck at about £400, less than half of what was required. In desperation Arrowsmith decided to turn to public events as fundraisers, particularly those held at the Rifle Drill Hall where he sat on the management body. In April 1895 profits from a series of promenade concerts at the Drill Hall were advertised as going to the statue and this was followed by an 'Exhibition of Handicrafts' which ran from August through to the end of the year, eventually raising £200 for the project.^[23]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2

In June 1895 members of the Corporation studied a half size model of the prospective statue in the Council House and despite some dissent agreed that it should be positioned in "the best [place] that could be found – taking precedence even of King William".^[24]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMchC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2

This turned out to be St Augustine's Place in what is now known as the Centre in Bristol. However, as the day of the unveiling approached it became clear to Arrowsmith that despite all his efforts only around half the money required to design, fashion and erect the statue had been collected over more than eighteen months of fund-raising. Nevertheless, the unveiling went ahead on 13th November, Colston Day.



(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2050007284_8fcea35868.jpg)

Accounts of the event emphasise that hundreds, if not thousands, of Bristolians gathered in the Centre to witness the ceremony. However, large numbers were not unusual for a typical 'Colston Day', which according to one source had been "virtually a public holiday since the 1720s" and during the Victorian revival had effectively become 'Bristol Day'.^[25]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2)

It is therefore hard to judge how many members of the public were in the centre of Bristol *because* it was a public holiday; one of the few such days in the calendar year the working classes would have enjoyed.

The unveiling was led by the Mayor and Bishop of Bristol, surrounded by the business and political elite of the city. The mayor's speech concentrated on Bristol's maritime history of mercantilism and Colston's philanthropy. There was, of course, no direct mention of Colston's leading role in the slave trade through his management positions and investments in the Royal African Company.^[26]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2)

The same had been true of the whole fund-raising campaign. However, the Mayor made one major indirect reference in his speech in stating that Colston's "business was mainly with the West Indies"; essentially code for involvement in slavery and the slave trade.^[27]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2)

It is interesting that in 1895 there was at least some clarity about this aspect, albeit indirect. This should be compared to clumsy attempts by apologists over a century later to 'airbrush the history' by portraying Colston as merely an Iberian, Mediterranean or Levant merchant with no direct connections to trans-Atlantic slavery.

The statue itself carried the messages that the Victorian re-inventors wanted to disseminate; Colston as the thoughtful and wise 'father of the city', 'merchant prince' and 'moral saint' and crucially that all of Bristol was behind the statue. It was adorned with four tablets carrying images that propagated these narratives, as described by a journalist from the *Bristol Mercury* the day after the unveiling:

The front panel is framed with sprays of evergreens and surmounted by a shield with emblems of that wisdom and learning of which Edward Colston was such a brilliant example, and bears the inscription :- "Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city, AD, 1895." The back panel represents the finding of a dolphin by an officer and some of the crew in a hole in the ship's side...The city arms are at the top of the panel. The right-hand panel shows Colston distributing alms to distressed widows and orphans. His crest is at the top of the panel. The left hand panel, or anchor panel, is symbolical of the sea.^[28]

(https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZiT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-28)



(<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/colston-2009-y.jpg>)



(<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/colston-2009-x.jpg>)



(<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/colston-2009-yy.jpg>)

Arrowsmith was present at the unveiling and was directly referred to in the Mayor's address as having conceived the idea for the statue. The Mayor went on to state:

When he [Arrowsmith] takes anything in hand he goes on with it, facing all obstacles, like a true Bristol man (applause). And I am sure he would wish me to acknowledge that he has been ably supported by all the various societies which commemorate to-day the name of Edward Colston (applause).

The Mayor's allusion to "facing all obstacles" was probably a reference to the chronic difficulties Arrowsmith had faced in raising the funds for the statue and it was ironic that he followed this by praising the support for the project given by the Colston societies. As we have seen their financial backing had been limited and this state of affairs was reflected later in that evening at the annual dinners of the various societies. Arrowsmith and the fund-raising committee, still hundreds of pounds short of paying for the statue, made another desperate attempt to cajole money from the numerous wealthy members of the Colston societies. As the hundreds of diners sat down at the different banquets they were faced with "small envelopes...with a suggestion that they should contribute small sums towards the balance still wanted in connection with the Colston Statue Fund".^[29]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmyHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-2

Once again the response was fairly paltry, with more than 200 members of the Liberal Anchor Society, Arrowsmith's own organisation, only donating £12 and the Tory dominated Dolphin Society producing a pathetic £1 and 10s.^[30]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmyHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-3

A fortnight after the unveiling ceremony and the disappointing fund-raising dinners the statue Committee stated that £548 had been collected over the two years since the idea had been first been announced by Arrowsmith, still several hundred pounds short of that required. Several more public appeals were made and by the end of December another £100 had been squeezed from the subscribers, though about a quarter of this had come from the Society of Merchant Venturers and the list of sponsors in the *Bristol Mercury* now carried asterisks signifying a second donation.^[31]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmyHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-3

Attempts to make the "citizens of Bristol" feel guilty about their lack of financial enthusiasm for the Colston statue clearly failed and the whole exercise ground to a halt at the end of the year. Arrowsmith and the committee appear to have given up on the public subscription scheme at this point and one source noted that the remaining balance of "about £150 was given by an anonymous citizen who had already subscribed liberally".^[32]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmyHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-3

Another source, *Arrowsmith's: Dictionary of Bristol*, which we might expect to be close to the truth in this particular matter, stated enigmatically that the 'mystery' donor was "a gentleman who had been one of the promoters of the design".^[33]

https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/?fbclid=IwAR0rJh_gbWDBoMcHC0qSA48w7XoFuUOI9fCiZIT9G5iGyR77wxdLfpmYHzQ#myths-within-myths-n-3

The "anonymous citizen" was almost certainly Arrowsmith himself who, by this late stage, had probably had enough of trying to extract money from his fellow Bristolians. The abject failure of even the Colston societies to make a majority contribution to the statue, let alone the disastrous 'public subscription' scheme, puts to the sword the idea that this was a universally popular project as some Bristol myth-makers suggest. From a study of the published subscription lists, it can be verified that a number of the Bristol business elite had contributed to the fund. However, at the end of the day, the statue was the vanity project of one wealthy business owner who ended up grudgingly paying for his idea. The memorial to Edward Colston was thus hardly "Erected by citizens of Bristol" as the inscription on the memorial claims so defiantly.

Acknowledgments

This article is based on an extract from the Bristol Radical History Group book *From Wulfstan to Colston: Severing the sinews of slavery in Bristol* (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/pamphleteer/from-wulfstan-to-colston/>) by Mark Steeds and Roger Ball (2020). This article also draws heavily from Spencer Jordan's excellent analysis of Bristol elites and the reinvention of Edward Colston in the Victorian period in his 1999 PhD thesis (UWE) *The development and implementation of authority in a regional capital: A study of Bristol's elites, 1835-1939*. If you would like to read more of Jordan's work on Edward Colston his essay *The Myth of Edward Colston: Bristol Docks, the 'Merchant' Elite and the Legitimisation of Authority 1860-1880* can be found in Poole, S. (Ed.) *A city built upon the water: Maritime Bristol 1750-1900* (Bristol: Redcliffe/Regional History Centre UWE, 2013).

Notes

^[1]Cork T., Plaque marking slave trade victims to be put on statue of Edward Colston in Bristol *Bristol Live* 28 Feb 2018 <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/plaque-marking-slave-trade-victims-1278081> (<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/plaque-marking-slave-trade-victims-1278081>); Bristol MP calls for Edward Colston statue to be removed *BBC News* 11 Oct 2018 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-45825768> (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-45825768>). **[Back...]**

^[2]It appears that a Daily Telegraph journalist believed the same when he recently stated "The statue was put up in Bristol in 1895, several years after Colston's death", though he was clearly unsure when Colston had actually lived. Talk about 'erasing history'! Lowe, Y. Bristol MP calls for slave trader's statue to be removed from city because it offends black residents *The Telegraph* 14 October 2018. **[Back...]**

^[3]Jordan, S. *The development and implementation of authority in a regional capital: A study of Bristol's elites, 1835-1939* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of West of England, 1999) p. 299. **[Back...]**

^[4]Ibid. p. 297. **[Back...]**

^[5] Ibid. **[Back...]**

^[6]Ibid., p. 323. **[Back...]**

^[7]Jordan demonstrates that prior to WW1 over 80 per cent of Dolphin, Anchor and Grateful Society presidents could be linked to at least one of sixteen other 'elite' organisations examined in his study. Ibid p. 295. **[Back...]**

^[8]Ibid., pp. 301-302. **[Back...]**

^[9]Ibid., p. 302. **[Back...]**

^[10]Ibid., p. 311. **[Back...]**

^[11]Dresser, M. *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in Bristol* (Bristol: Redcliffe Press, 2007) p. 3. **[Back...]**

^[12]This story turned out to be true at least in part. In the early 2000s *The Bristolian* broadsheet published a story about the 'hair and nails' which was roundly dismissed by several commentators. However, in 2016 another source appeared, an extract from an essay in the Colston's Girl's School (CGS) newsletter by a pupil who had been on a school trip to Merchants Hall and had been "disgusted" on seeing the relics. *Colston's Chronicle "Heritage Day" Newsletter of CGS Edition XXXI Summer 2012* p. 4. In 2017 the author obtained a photograph of the hair and nails in a cabinet in Merchant's Hall taken during a civic dinner. When questioned on Charter Day in 2017, representatives from the Society of Merchant Venturers at first denied the relics were held in Merchants Hall but later admitted they were, claiming that they "probably weren't Colston's". Discussion with the author, November 2017. **[Back...]**

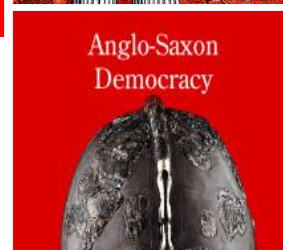
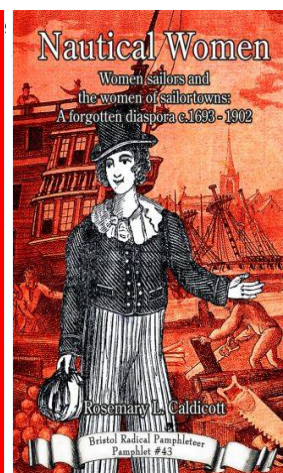
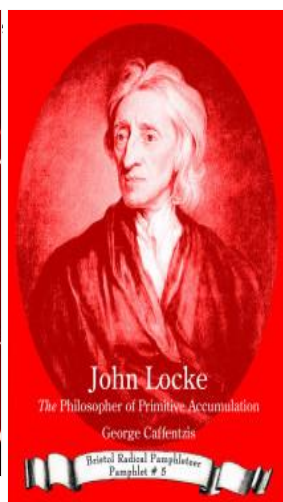
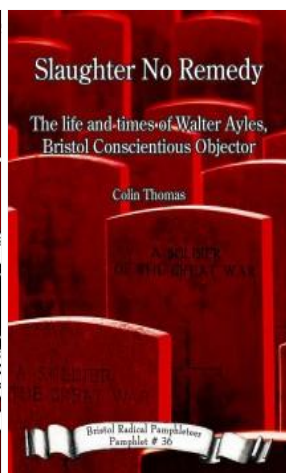
^[13]This story reappeared in a letter from persistent religious defender of Colston in the Bristol Post: Whittern, D. "There's just no evidence to stack up" *Bristol Post: Your Say* 24 October 2017. **[Back...]**

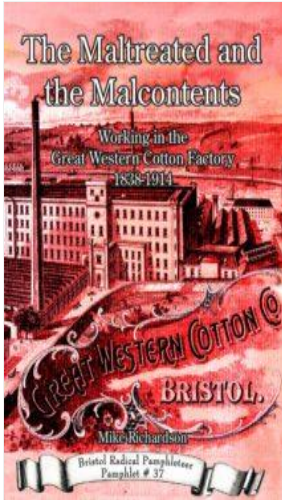
^[14]Quoted in Jordan, S. "The Myth of Edward Colston: Bristol Docks, the 'Merchant' Elite and the Legitimisation of Authority 1860-1880" in Poole, S. (Ed.) *A city built upon the water: Maritime Bristol 1750-1900* (Bristol: Redcliffe/Regional History Centre UWE, 2013) pp. 179-181. **[Back...]**

^[15]Jordan, *The development and implementation of authority in a regional capital* pp. 310-311. **[Back...]**

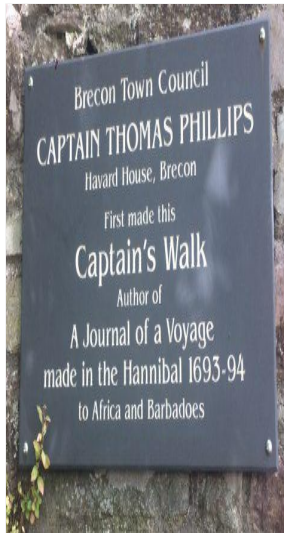
- [16]The strike waves of 1889-90 and 1892-93 are detailed in BRHG pamphlets: Richardson, M. *The Bristol Strike Wave of 1889-1890 – Socialists, New Unionists and New Women – Part 1: Days of Hope* (Bristol: BRHG #21, 2012); Richardson, M. *The Bristol Strike Wave of 1889-1890 – Socialists, New Unionists and New Women – Part 2: Days of Doubt* (Bristol: BRHG #22, 2012); Ball, R. *The Origins and an Account of Black Friday: 23rd December 1892* (Bristol: BRHG #24, 2013). **[Back...]**
- [17]*Bristol Mercury* 8 June, 14 November 1895. **[Back...]**
- [18]*Ibid.*, 21 April, 8 June 1894. **[Back...]**
- [19]*Ibid.*, 9 June 1894, 14 November 1895. **[Back...]**
- [20]*Ibid.*, 3 October 1894. **[Back...]**
- [21]*Ibid.*, 16 July 1894. **[Back...]**
- [22]*Ibid.*, 27 September 1894. **[Back...]**
- [23]*Ibid.*, 8 April, 21 August, 14 December 1895. **[Back...]**
- [24]*Ibid.*, 24 June 1895. The half-size model may be the statue that now resides in the foyer of Colston's Girl's School. The allusion to "King William" denotes the statue of William III in Queen Square which was erected in 1736 and was the most impressive monument in the city. **[Back...]**
- [25]*From apprentices to the elderly: Celebrating 250 years of the Grateful Society* (Bristol: Grateful Society, 2008) p. 9. It appears 'Colston Day' as a full day's holiday in Bristol disappeared in 1901, another sign of the decline of the 'cult of Colston' in the twentieth century: Dunn, S. *Colston's Girls' School: The First Hundred Years* (Bristol: Redcliffe, 1991) p. 53. **[Back...]**
- [26]For a comprehensive analysis of his time in the RAC see Ball, R. *Edward Colston Research Paper #2: The Royal African Company and Edward Colston (1680-92)* Bristol Radical History Group, 17 June 2017 <https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/edward-colston-research-paper-2/> (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/edward-colston-research-paper-2/>) **[Back...]**
- [27]*Bristol Mercury* 14 November 1895. **[Back...]**
- [28]*Ibid.* **[Back...]**
- [29]*Ibid.*, 13 November 1895. **[Back...]**
- [30]Morgan, Sally. "Memory and the merchants: commemoration and civic identity." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998) p. 106. **[Back...]**
- [31]*Bristol Mercury* 25 November, 10 and 30 December 1895. **[Back...]**
- [32]Latimer, J. *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century (concluded) 1887-1900* (Bristol: William George's Sons, 1902) p. 46. **[Back...]**
- [33]*Arrowsmith's: Dictionary of Bristol* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1906) p. 113. **[Back...]**

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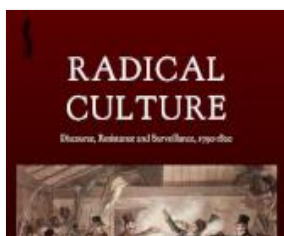
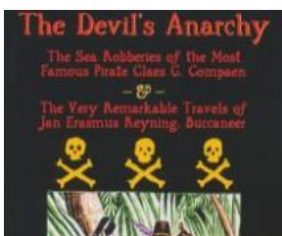
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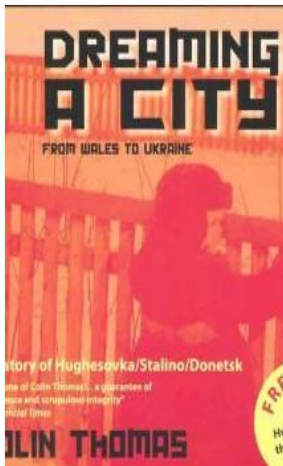
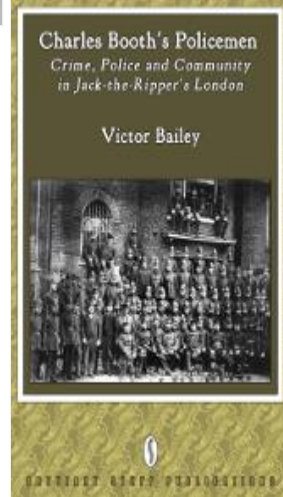
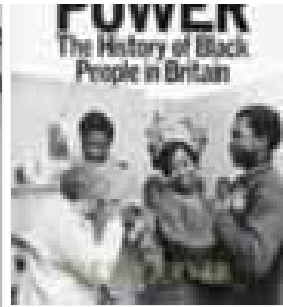
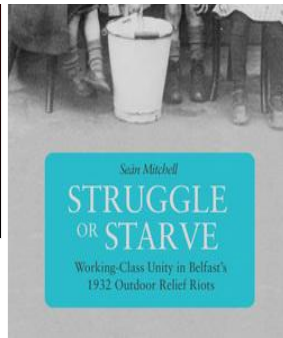
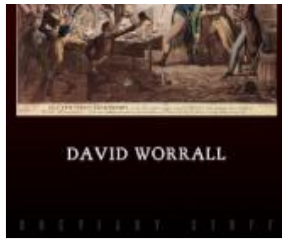
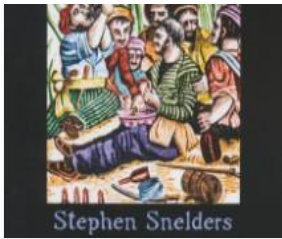


(<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/museum/>)



More Books





15 Comments

1.  **Rosemary**
October 17, 2018 at 2:50 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-194639>)

Fascinating to read the story and history of this statue. Excellent research! Looking forward to reading the book, Walfstan to Colston

[Reply](#)

2.  **L Thessaly**
June 8, 2020 at 12:26 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215902>)

Found this today after the statue got shoved into the channel. V interesting read. Thanks!!!!

[Reply](#)

3.  **Teri Brewer**
June 8, 2020 at 2:55 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215909>)

Would very much like to meet for a chat to discuss some aspects of this that are similar to patterns I found in Oxford in research I did over a long period there, This will probably have to wait til the next stage in Covid lifting, but I would be in Bristol fairly regularly in August and hope we can set up a meeting then. In the meantime, with your permission I would like to cite your piece here as an example of recent work on other patterns of development of civic ceremony and ritual for a little paper I am writing at the moment.

all the best,

Dr. Teri Brewer
07515 681487

(retired formerly a visiting fellow and course tutor for MA in Archaeological Screen Media at Bristol University, now living in Frome). I am a folklorist, anthropologist and filmmaker who PhD thesis was mostly on the invented and adapted traditions in Oxford surrounding the 'May Morning' ceremony. You may be aware of my film work or the ensuing repatriation project on the donated Native American remains in the Bristol City Museum which culminated in a ceremony jointly developed with the museum and tribal descendants to mark the transfer of those remains in a city council ceremony last year.

[Reply](#)

4.  **Deborah Barry**
June 9, 2020 at 8:49 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215947>)

Thank you for a very informative read. Sent to me by a friend on Facebook. Well researched. Enlightening and good to be reminded of myths and how they become 'truths'.

[Reply](#)

5.  **Philippe Close**
June 9, 2020 at 9:46 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215950>)

In light of recent events, this article should be read widely.

[Reply](#)

6.  **Mandy** (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/>)
June 9, 2020 at 10:27 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215953>)

Very interesting article to read at this time. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

7.  **Georgia**
June 9, 2020 at 12:13 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215955>)

Your website's been providing incredibly useful information and source material, so thank you.

[Reply](#)

8.  **Joseph Lewis**
June 9, 2020 at 2:05 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215961>)

Please keep me updated with regarding BRISTOL black HISTORY.

[Reply](#)

9.  **Chris Larner**
June 9, 2020 at 3:00 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215966>)

Brilliant. This article is exactly the basis for a permanent exhibition in Bristol Museum, which needs to surround and explain the statue, once it is rescued from the water and displayed, rightfully dented, in a proper historical context.

[Reply](#)

10.  **Stephen Petter**
June 9, 2020 at 4:52 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215971>)

Fascinating! I wonder if our central library has a section on Bristol's Alternative History? If not maybe we should campaign for it.

[Reply](#)

11.  **Nick Rogers**
June 9, 2020 at 7:20 pm (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-215976>)

A truly excellent essay which draws on Jordan's earlier essay but adds much on the making of the statue. Thank you. I learnt a lot from it. It's worth pondering why Burke's statue was erected in roughly the same era. Another 'liberal' venture in the reinvention of tradition.

[Reply](#)

12.  **Helen Gilbert**
June 10, 2020 at 9:35 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-216003>)

Very interesting. Just who are the Merchant Venturers? They appear to be behind recent efforts to scupper the council's attempt to change the plaque wording.

[Reply](#)

13.  **Gary Walling**
June 11, 2020 at 12:56 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-216020>)

Seek (on Google) and you will find in one click

<https://www.merchantventurers.com/> (<https://www.merchantventurers.com/>)

[Reply](#)

14.  **Dave Parker**
June 13, 2020 at 6:26 am (<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/myths-within-myths/#comment-216081>)

An excellent piece – I imagine the author never imagined the topic would become global news and inspire the toppling of a king, even one who's been deservedly dead for a century. And it's a valuable reminder to scrutinise the reality behind such manufactured cults portrayed as united expressions of "the will of the people". How many of our supposedly timeless memorials are the product of similar retrospective astroturfing by self-interested cliques? I look forward to more revelations in the coming months about who actually comprised these "previous generations" with their "different understandings of right and wrong". We wouldn't want to "impoverish the education of generations to come", eh, Boris?

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