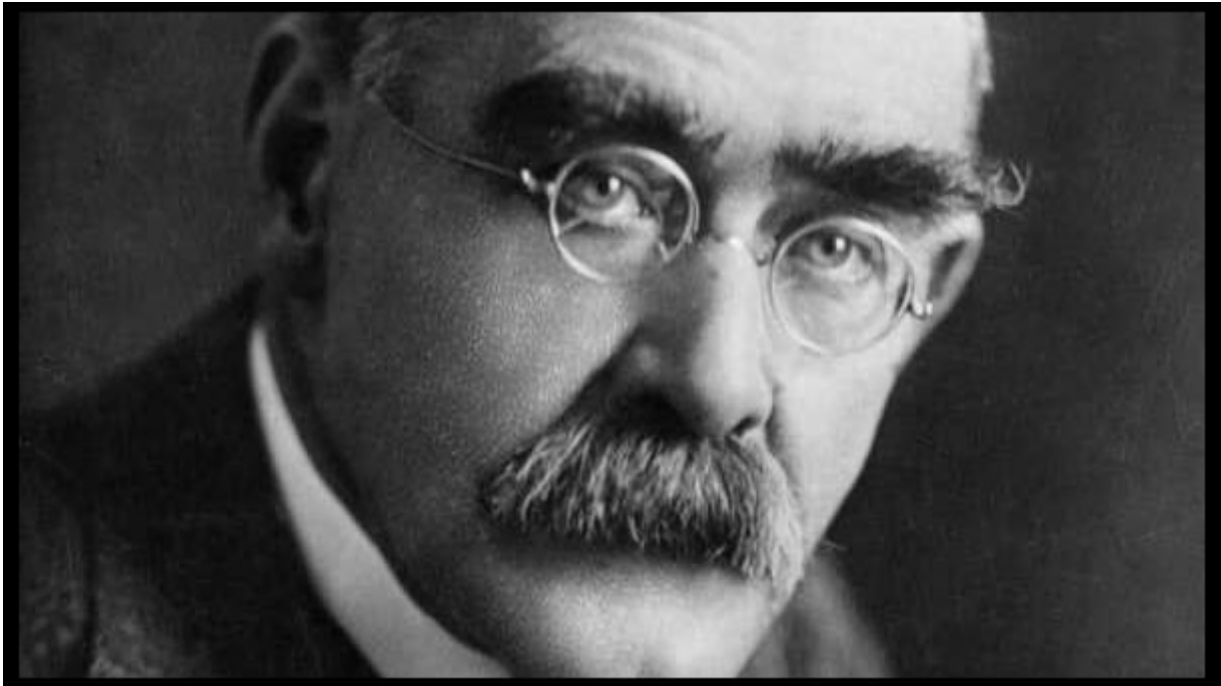


Beware, Wokery is Increasing

by Michael Curtis



Rudyard Kipling

The list is growing of historical figures or public personalities, authors or artists of recent years, whose views are considered by the woke brigade as unacceptable, backward or bigoted. It raises not only the question of ongoing and changing assessments of these figures and personalities and expressions of free speech, but also whether one can enjoy a work or activity which is regarded as unacceptable for present day political or cultural reasons, or for being the product of an unenlightened era.

A number of incidents in 2021 illustrate some manifestation of bigotry and cancel culture. One concerns a German artist, Jess de Wahls, a textile artist born in East Berlin, whose work has been removed from the gift shop of the Royal Academy after trans activists accused her of expressing “transphobic views” in a blog she posted in 2019. Apparently, she had criticized “gender identity ideology” and Stonewall, the LGBT charity for gay and lesbian causes, which has been accused of fostering a

climate of intolerance in workplaces in the UK. Miss de Wahls wrote in her blog that a woman is an adult human female and not an identity or feeling. She could not accept assertions that people are in fact the opposite sex to when they were born.

A more general issue is the suspension on March 24, 2021 of a teacher for showing pupils a drawing taken from Charlie Hebdo, the French satirical magazine, during religious studies class at Batley Grammar School in West Yorkshire in UK. The teacher refuses to return to teaching for fear of being attacked, and has moved to a secret location, though the school board Trust ruled that the suspension should be lifted. However, the Trust did recognize that using the image did cause deep offence to a number of students, parents, and members of the school community.

A third new issue is that involving a new TV channel GB News, pledged to confront cancel culture. The channel expressed a critical view of "taking the knee," the activity becoming more familiar under pressure from Stop Funding Hate activists. The immediate response was that large corporations, including Vodafone, Ikea, and Kopparberg, the Swedish cider brand, pulled their proposed ads to the channel. The danger is that business companies may be bowing to political pressure.

A more controversial issue concerns the well-known writer Enid Blyton, the prolific writer of children's books. English Heritage, a registered charity, manages more than 400 historic monuments including Stonehenge, and administers the blue plaque system marking on walls the places where people lived or worked. These plaques in London have commemorated more than 950 historical figures. Following BLM protests in 2020, English Heritage vowed to review all blue plaques for links to "contested" figures, stating that individuals associated with Britain's colonial past are offensive to many or seen as negative. It plans to provide on the plaques more information on people of this kind so that their stories will be told

without embellishment or excuses. Only about 19 words can be put on a plaque, but the EH website provides a fuller picture of a person's life.

In June 2021, EH updated the plaque, installed in 1997, on Enid Blyton, 1897-1968, on her Chessington home in southwest London, and has linked her to racism.

Blyton has delighted children with tales of adventure, and it can be said her books encouraged generations of children to read. She composed more than 700 works and 4,500 short stories, and her books have sold more than 600 million copies.

Blyton work was criticized during her lifetime and has since then been criticized for racism, xenophobia, as well as lack of literary merit. In 2016 she was rejected by the advisory committee of the Royal Mint for commemoration on a 50 pence coin on the grounds she was a racist, sexist, homophobe, and not a very well recognized writer. Nevertheless, many generations of children have enjoyed her images of happy holidays by the seaside, picnics in the forests, the wreck on Treasure Island, escapist adventures to fire the imagination of a child.

Issues can be raised. Yes, some of her writing was racist and used language that is unacceptable today, but should her work be erased? Did her writings turn any child into a racist? In general, can one enjoy a work whose views or language are unacceptable today, but were developed in an earlier period.

The problem has arisen once again. One must appraise the stories of Blyton in the context of the time her books were written. Criticism of Blyton is not new. In 1960 Macmillan refused to publish her story, *The Mystery that Never Was*, because of its "Faint but unattractive touch of old-fashioned xenophobia towards foreign characters." In 1966 an article accused her of racism over her book *Little Black Doll*. In

this, a toy doll named Sambo is only accepted by his owner once "his ugly black face is washed clean by rain." Certain features in her writing have been changed, such as substitution of "goblins" for "golliwogs."

She would have written the stories and books differently if living today. Yet the basic question, relevant to the changes in the EH plaque, is whether her books spread any of the hatred or negativity in her writing, or influenced anyone to be a racist.

English Heritage has also updated the profiles of Benjamin Franklin and Rudyard Kipling with new sections on their attitudes to race, slavery, and empire. Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the U.S., is viewed as regarding black people as inferior and as an owner of enslaved people from about 1735 until 1781, six in his household. But Franklin's views began to change, and he questioned the morality of slavery, became president of Philadelphia's Abolition Society, though he did not free his own slaves. Kipling was listed for portraying imperialism as a mission of civilization.

Wokery is alive and active in Britain. Goldsmiths College, University of London, in New Cross, in south east London, following a motion proposed by its students union, will allow students to delay sitting their exams if they have suffered "racial trauma." This illness has been incorporated as one of the reasons to defer essays and exams for blacks and persons of color students through self-certification. The stated reason is that systemic racism impacts the ability of these students to submit essays or exams at the proper time.

The British Equality and Human Rights Commission said in 2019 that about 13 per cent of students said they had experienced racial harassment at a university. A fifth of those said they had been physically attacked and a half had experienced racist name calling.

Another study in Goldsmiths in October 2019 indicated that 26 per cent of minority students said they had experienced racism. At the time, 45 per cent of their students were from minority backgrounds.

This is a new feature. Hitherto, students could ask a university to take into account their serious life events, personal trauma, mental health problems, bereavement, court attendance and caring responsibilities, when assessing their record of studies. To this has been added "racial trauma." Already in 2020, Oxford and Warwick Universities offered black students the chance to apply for leniency in their grading. Goldsmiths goes further in allowing black and persons of color to defer because of alleged racism. Is this fair to white students?

Cancel culture has been at work for some time at University College, London. The College authorities now express "deep regret" that UCL played a fundamental role in the development, propagation, and legitimization of "eugenics." They pledged to give greater prominence to teaching "the malign legacy," of the eugenics movement, and to acknowledge and address its historical links with the movement.

In accordance with this resolve, UCL renamed two lecture theaters and a building that honored the prominent eugenicists, Francis Galton, polymath in many fields of science and the pioneer who coined the word eugenics in 1883, and Karl Pearson first UCL professor of eugenics. UCL also stripped the name of Ronald Fisher, who succeeded Pearson as professor of eugenics, from a research center and renamed it "The Center for Computational Biology."

The thrust of the UCL position is that the eugenics ideology cemented the "spurious idea" that varieties of human life could be assigned different value. It therefore provided justification of some of the most appalling crimes in history; genocide, forced euthanasia, colonialism, and other forms of

mass murder and oppression based on racial and ableist hierarchy. UCL holds that the legacy and consequences of eugenics still cause direct harm through racism, antisemitism, ableism (discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities) and other harmful stereotypes that they feed. All this is a striking indictment, one contradicting the desirable values of equality, openness, and humanity.

It is important to be aware of issues and behavior that concern social justice and racial justice, and the campaign against racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination is highly desirable. But this should not lead to paranoia or extravagant criticism of past or present figures or ideas, irrespective of the context of time. Nor should individuals, because of differences of opinion or mistakes, become victims of persecution.