

Cancelling Cancel Culture

by Michael Curtis



When April with its sweet-smelling showers has pierced the drought of March to the roots, then folk long to go on pilgrimages to distant shrines known in various lands.

It may be too strong to say that a specter of uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions is haunting the Western democracies, but two interrelated issues are cause for concern. One is the apprehension that the West is erasing too readily historical landmarks or individuals that are regarded as inimical to certain modern sensibilities or is downplaying past achievements while other factors are considered more important. The second is the emergence of a “counter culture,” not simply the lack of commitment to a common culture but a modern form of ostracism removing or downgrading people,

expression, and ideas that are deemed offensive or problematic or not politically correct to particular groups or to social or professional circles.

Changes in culture in the U.S. may be illuminated or inferred from two recent events. One is the dilemma of the football team, the Washington Redskins, once the Boston Braves, which is presently known as the Washington Football Team until an inoffensive name is found. The other pertains to the symbolism of Winston Churchill. In 2001 the bust of Churchill was loaned by Prime Minister Tony Blair to President George W. Bush who put it in the Oval Office. The bust was removed by President Obama in 2009, and was reinstated by President Trump in 2017. On his first day in office, President Biden removed the bust from the Office, and replaced it with images of Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Robert Kennedy, and Cesar Chavez. Prime Minister Boris Johnson is not alone in seeing this new removal as a "snub to Britain."

A new development in Britain raises the issue of intellectual cultural amnesia or a lack of commitment to a historic culture. It stems from the decision of the University of Leicester which issued an extraordinary statement denying it was dropping Geoffrey Chaucer from its English courses because Chaucer was "too white." University plans had been revealed that he was being replaced by teaching modules on race, ethnicity, diversity, and sexuality. Such courses, a decolonized curriculum, according to university officials would match students' own interests and enthusiasms. This means that programs will be offered in English literature from "Shakespeare to Bernadine Evaristo," the author who in 2019 is the first black woman to win the Booker prize, the leading literary award in the English-speaking world. However, cuts in the programs will be made affecting John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, poems of John Donne, and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

It may be admitted that readers of Chaucer are a minority

cult, and that few are engaged in seeking adventure or glory in noble deeds as are the knights of Malory, but Chaucer is generally considered the father of English literature with his immortal works, *The Canterbury Tales* and *Beowulf*. He was the first person to be buried in Westminster Abbey in the area known as Poet's Corner. The decision of Leicester University is not simply another example of "cancel culture," but also is disregarding valuable information of early British history.

The Canterbury Tales, the 24 stories told 1387-1400, on the pilgrimage from Southwark to St. Thomas Becket's shrine in Canterbury, provides a portrait of English society at the time of the Peasants revolt in 1381, and turmoil in the church, told by a diverse wide ranging group of people, the knight, the merchant, the pardoner, the Wife of Bath, and social classes, thrown together by accident. Though on a "pilgrimage," the group is more concerned with material things rather than spiritual ones. Leicester, in its obsequiousness to political correctness, will deprive its students of an ironic and critical presentation of English society and of the Church at that time.

One of those critical of the impact of political correctness is Prime Minister Boris Johnson. We cannot, he said, now try to edit or censor our past: "We cannot pretend to have a different history." However, in recent weeks that history has been subject to different interpretation. Part of the multiple personality of Winston Churchill was that of animal lover with a menagerie of cats and dogs. His favorite cat was Nelson, a cat of bold nature which he took with him to 10 Downing Street. In 2020 an individual who wanted a dialogue about who should be regarded as a hero thought Horatio Nelson, the Admiral not the cat, had opposed the abolition of slavery, and sprayed the statue of Admiral Nelson, a native of the village of Burnham Thorpe in Norfolk, in the grounds of Norwich Cathedral with a sign, a black V in the middle of a circle, regarded as an anarchist sign. The Cathedral authorities in a

meek response stated that Nelson, though a national hero. "was like all of us, flawed in some ways."

Another victim of modern anti-racism is Charles Dickens, an author with *Great Expectations*, who supported liberal causes, including the European revolutions of the 1840s, expressed sympathy for the working class, abhorred slavery and supported the antislavery movement. However, in private letters Dickens expressed "racist" sentiments, such as referring to Indians as "low, treacherous, murderous, tigerous, villains." In 2020, the Charles Dickens Museum in Broadstairs, Kent, was defaced by a former local councilor who scrawled the words "Dickens, Racist," on the wall, and defaced a street sign of Dickens Road with black paint.

Many will be familiar with Oliver Cromwell, who led the Parliamentary army that defeated Charles I and became Lord Protector of England, but who was also responsible for brutal military dictates that led to deaths of thousands, including 2,000 in Wexford, in his invasion of Ireland. Statues to him have been built in a number of places, including one in Wythenshawe Park, Manchester. In June 2020 that bronze granite plinth and pedestal monument was vandalized with the words, "Cromwell, racist and cockroach," and the letters BLM were written on it. Some have viewed this act as one of mindless graffiti, arguing that the pyramids were built by slave labor: shall we tear them down?

Two more examples come from Britain, one from the British capital. The City of London is planning to remove statues of former Lord Mayor William Beckford and Sir John Cass because of their links to the slave trade. Beckford was twice Lord Mayor in 1762 and 1769. He was born in Jamaica, inherited 13 sugar plantations, and 3,000 slaves. He was usually considered a political reformer. Cass was a merchant and in 1705 was a board member of the Royal African company. He was Tory MP for the City of London 1710-1715 and Sheriff of London.

He funded a mixed school, the Cass Foundation school that has become part of the City of London Polytechnique and now called the London Metropolitan University. But the name of Cass has been removed from one of the units in the University.

After the BLM protests in the U.S. and elsewhere, the Exeter City Council set up a task force to review the complaints that had arisen over the bronze statue of General Redvers Buller, astride his favorite horse, erected in 1905 in the city center of Exeter. Buller had been born in Crediton, about seven miles from Exeter. He was a war hero who won the Victoria Cross, the highest award for gallantry in the face of the enemy, during the Second Zulu war in 1879 where he carried three men to safety during a military defeat. He became commander in chief of British forces during the early part of the Second Boer War and subsequently commanded the army in Natal until 1900, but was an unsuccessful general. He was defeated three times by the Boers with heavy losses. After his "retirement" he was awarded the freedom of Exeter and given a jeweled sword.

The review by the City Council concluded that the statue should be removed, but about 7,500 people signed a petition that the statue be saved and that "historically illiterate people cannot erase our history." The problem arose because in Buller's case that history includes references to colonial campaigns on the plinth of the statue including the words, "he saved Natal." His fault was that he was linked to British imperialism.

On the general issue of correctness some interesting remarks have come from an unlikely source, the brilliant British comedian Rowan Atkinson. Without specifically mentioning cancel culture he alluded to the "digital equivalent of a medieval mob roaming the streets looking for someone to burn." Modern societies must be aware of the tendency to boycott individuals or ideas that are said to have acted or spoken in a questionable or controversial manner. The rules of the game may change, and with it changing standards. It is

wise to adhere to the approach that there is more than one set of publicly palatable ideas about history and about the present at this time.