

# Woke Marches on in Black and White



by Michael Curtis

Are you having any fun? Is cancel culture wiping out comedy because of fear of offending someone? A BBC poll just reported that virtually half of the British population toned down or disguised their opinions to avoid causing offense to someone they've just met. Life is full of ifs and buts. Better have a little fun.

In so many activities, content that may be seen as potentially offensive, and all racial stereotypes and links to slavery must be removed from art, history, education, and literature, lest they contaminate others.

The first culprit is the space that once called the most

amusing room in Europe. It is the Tate Britain Rex Whistler Restaurant, a handsome charming room, which will be closed to diners now that a committee of the Tate ruled that the imagery of the large mural in it was "offensive." The mural, painted in 1927 by the British artist and designer Rex Whistler, then aged 23, titled "The expedition in pursuit of rare meats," a whimsical narrative portrays a group of seven people traveling by horse and cart and bicycles to save their people, but also two enslaved black children in chains and caricatured Chinese characters. The mural will remain, but room will be "repurposed" by an artist who will create a display of interpretative material "reflecting contemporary values and commitments." Whistler who was killed on his first day of action with the Welsh Guards in Normandy in July 1944, will no doubt be pleased the room, if not dining facilities, will be open to the public.

The culture cleansing continues. As a result of an audit in the wake of BLM protests, displays of works by well-known British satirists are being removed in the Cartoon Museum in London because its galleries are overrepresented by "white cisgender men." The Museum is "interrogating" its collection of over 6,000 British cartoons and comic artwork. In particular, pieces by William Hogarth and James Gillray will be less prominent. Evidently, the Museum should reconsider any reference to Hogarth as a "cisgender" man. He was not only a great artist, who lampooned British society in the 18th century, but an author who wrote about the grace and beauty of the "serpentine line" in great art.

The Tate Britain Museum has descended to farce. It organized an exhibition presenting Hogarth in a "fresh light." In it was the famous self-portrait of William Hogarth of 1757 that shows him sitting on a wooden chair. The comment in the Tate text was confined to the remark that the "chair was made from timber shipped from the colonies via routes which also shipped enslaved people." Even disregarding the chair, it is in fact a

handsome portrait.

From art to commerce. Before Covid ended it, the Bank of England headquarters in London displayed an exhibition, that will reappear, of former governors and directors dead for more than 200 years, who, had links with the slave trade. The Bank removed oil paintings and busts of seven former leading figures who were linked. The Bank was never itself directly involved in the slave trade, but now proclaims it is concerned about the connections of former officials. The Bank holds it is important to acknowledge that it was a creature of its time, with “unsavory elements of the past, but we are a different institution now.” In somewhat tortuous logic, the Bank now says that “its institutional standing benefits in some part at least from the continuity of our existence.” At least, our money is still safe.

Other elements in British finance have entered woke territory. Two of the UK largest companies have pledged to pay large sums to BAME, black, Asian, and minority ethnic, committees, after their roles in the slave trade were revealed. Lloyd's of London was active in 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> slave trade. Greene King, a large pub chain, was founded in early 19<sup>th</sup> by Benjamin Greene who benefited from government compensation when slavery was abolished in 1833. Some nine UK businesses, including Barclay's Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland, benefited directly or indirectly from that government compensation.

Cancel culture is tackling a troubling issue, why are statues from an earlier era white? Cambridge University Museum, as part of its strategy to combat accusations of systemic racism within the Classics department, has apologized for the whiteness of the portraits and busts of which it has 600 casts in WHITE marble from ancient Greece and Rome. Information panels at the Museum will explain that the color once there has been lost and now the casts give the misleading impression of the whiteness and absence of diversity of the ancient

world. This action plan notes that Classics at Cambridge has been insufficient in relationship to imperialism, colonialism, and entrenched racism.

Students at Jesus College, Cambridge, demanded the removal from the College chapel, of the plaque of Tobias Rustat, 17<sup>th</sup> century major benefactor to the College and who created the first fund to buy books for Cambridge University library. The proposal is for the memorial, not to be destroyed but to be removed from the chapel to a permanent exhibition space in the college where it can be explained,

The diocese of Ely, with a church appointed judge, is to rule over the future of the memorial. Rustat did hold shares in the Royal African company, the slave trading company, but this accounted for only 1.7 per cent of his total worth.

On February 8, 2022, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rev. Justin Welby at the General Synod, the legislative body of the Church of England, holding hearings on the issue, entered the debate, asking why is it so much agony to remove a memorial to slavery? Why go through hearings? The memorial to slavery, he said, sits in front of the space of the Master of Jesus College, Sonata Alleyne, who is a black woman, born in Barbados and co-founder of a cross-platform media production company.

At the same meeting, Lord Boateng, former Labour MP, and Britain's first black government minister, who is leading a three-year review on racism in the Church, said it was too white. Imagine, he said, what it is to go into a place of worship and see a monument to someone "who was a party to the enslavement of your ancestors."

Some 200 students at Churchill College, Cambridge put their names in an open letter to remove the name of a supposed racist. The Seeley library of the history faculty may be renamed because Sir John Seeley, Regius professor of history

in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, defended the British Empire and promoted the concept of Greater Britain. British rule, he thought, was in India's best interest. We seem, he said, to have acquired half the world in a fit of absence of mind. Though Seeley was a liberal, a man who advocated reform of higher education, and supported the admission of women into universities, the students held that keeping him "would prove the logics (?) of imperialism and colonialism remain central to the university."

Free speech is being limited on the campus to ensure that students will be kept safe. Downing College issued instructions on how to report incidents of racism, an ideology and a set of practices, it said, are based on ideas of inherited white racial superiority that normalizes control, domination, and exclusion over people of color, while legitimating privilege and oppression. This racism includes beliefs, feelings, utterances and actions, which promote the thriving of dominant groups while contributing to the marginalization of minority groups.

The College document instructed students how to identify micro-aggressions, by words and behavior. A phrase, "where are you really from," was seen as particularly undesirable.

At Cambridge, freshers are obliged to take anti-racism classes covering subjects such as "microaggressions" and whiteness is centric.

Scotland cannot resist the trend. A study by the National Trust for Scotland found that more than a third of Scotland's greatest castles and heritage sites had links to the slave trade. Many of the 48 in the properties examined were bought and built with money brought back by Scottish settlers from sugar plantations in the West Indies or the tobacco fields of southern U.S. states which relied on slave labor. One such site is the Glenfinnan monument at the head of Loch Shiel, an area known from the activity of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the birthplace of the novelist JM Barrie.

One college has resisted the trend. Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge (Keys College) founded in 1348, announced it will not fly the LGBTQ+ flag, but will fly its own flag which it said was a symbol; that unites all in the College community, and the College would not choose between the plurality of good causes, and that it was committed to ending discrimination and to improving diversity. Better have a little fun.