



Report

Difficult Histories & Positive Identities

James Wallis



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Difficult Histories & Positive Identities

Author

Dr James Wallis

Research Fellow, University of Essex

Honorary Research Fellow, University of Exeter

Research Associate (freelance), Cumberland Lodge

Editors

Dr Jan-Jonathan Bock

Programme Director, Cumberland Lodge

Helen Taylor

Press & Communications Director, Cumberland Lodge

Foreword



This Cumberland Lodge Report marks the culmination of a 12-month project to explore the legacy of highlighted 'difficult' aspects of the United Kingdom's history, in relation to contemporary identities and forms of belonging. It draws on the wisdom and experience of academics, educationalists, museum curators, non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, policymakers and young people.

Difficult Histories & Positive Identities offers an interdisciplinary, and cross-sector insight into how aspects of the past can be engaged with in ways that bring about meaningful experiences of political and social belonging for people of all ages, backgrounds and perspectives, in the present.

Part I of this report draws on an interdisciplinary review of literature and case studies to chart what 'difficult histories' are and how they manifest today, across a wide variety of settings. It also explores what they might mean for our collective future. Part II summarises the key themes and best-practice recommendations that emerged from our Cumberland Lodge conference held in February 2019. These ideas were subsequently reviewed and refined at an expert consultation convened in June 2019, involving a broad spectrum of conference representatives and further specialists.

Difficult Histories & Positive Identities is one of four key issues that Cumberland Lodge addressed in its 2018-19 series on 'Identities & Belonging'. We look forward to seeing how it inspires positive action to promote more peaceful, open and inclusive societies.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edmund Newell". The script is cursive and fluid.

Canon Dr Edmund Newell
Chief Executive, Cumberland Lodge

About the author



This report is written by Dr James Wallis, who was commissioned by Cumberland Lodge as a freelance Research Associate, to support its work on *Difficult Histories & Positive Identities* in 2018-19.

James is a Research Fellow at the University of Essex, and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter. He previously completed a Collaborative Doctoral Award at Exeter University and Imperial War Museums (IWM), where he examined the representation and display politics of First World War exhibitions created since 1964.

James continues to work on First World War public engagement through 'Reflections on the Centenary of the First World War: Learning and Legacies for the Future', an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project. Working across sectors with community groups, heritage practitioners, and academics, this work is evaluating outcomes of the four-year centennial commemorations, across the UK.

James' interdisciplinary research explores conflict heritage and commemorative practice in various settings, with a view to understanding the ways in which – as well as the reasons why – the past is utilised in the present. His published work includes *Commemorative Spaces of the First World War: Historical Geographies at the Centenary* (Routledge, 2017). In June 2018, he was appointed one of 20 Associates for IWM's Institute for the Public Understanding of War and Conflict.

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Executive summary

There is no single way to view the past and to apply historical lessons to the present: historical enquiry is contested, because we investigate the past through the lens of the present, shaped by a diversity of current world-views, values, and attitudes. Diverse individuals and groups experience history differently, and leave different archival and material trails behind them. This report reviews research and thinking about approaches to a particular aspect of ‘difficult histories’, and its ramifications for British identities.

In recent years, complex legacies of conflict and imperialism have channelled debates around how countries, groups, and individuals address challenging dimensions of the past. The approach of invoking a supposedly collective past in order to justify actions in the present leads to contested outcomes, including the ways in which populations discuss the possibility of a shared sense of identity and belonging.

This report outlines the need to confront the past in a more honest and open manner, because a critical examination of the past enables us to exercise aspirations and hope for a more peaceful, open, and inclusive society. However, this process also carries risks, including anxiety and ignorance. Historically, there have been significant exclusions from historical analysis, which have opened up disparities in terms of which histories are interpreted and who they are interpreted by. Perhaps the principal challenge for approaching ‘difficult histories’ lies in balancing diverse historical narratives with accessibility and participation, all of which entails a process of revisiting the past in order to move on to better futures.

Part I of *Difficult Histories & Positive Identities* showcases how a ‘difficult histories’ approach can be deployed as a strategy for learning and (emotional) engagement across settings such as schools, public spaces, and museums, and through activism or peace and reconciliation campaigns. Case studies, such as the *#RhodesMustFall* campaign, the teaching of ‘difficult

history' in UK classrooms, or the German experience of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* after the Second World War and The Holocaust, reflect on national and international engagements with, and responses to, problematic pasts.

Part II of the report shares cross-sector reflections and practical recommendations for positive intervention and change. It emphasises the significance of choosing particular histories over others, and the importance of considering for whom the chosen subject matter is 'difficult'.

Key findings include the following:

- 'Difficult histories' influence the processes through which identities are formed in the present, with impacts ranging from the marginalisation of certain groups to the active avoidance of erasure or forgetting of the past.
- The ways in which institutions and narratives shape our understanding of the past as a collective experience, by constructing a notion of historical awareness, impact on our sense of social belonging and (national) identity.
- A 'difficult histories' approach to the past offers a way of countering simplistic – and potentially limiting or even exclusionary – national myths, by acting in opposition to 'comfortable history'.
- Engaging with 'difficult histories' requires a willingness to engage with 'discomfort', and an equal commitment on the parts of educators and learners, in order to change or influence existing perspectives.
- Re-engaging with the past from this more critical perspective means being open to asking alternative questions and including hidden perspectives. This can help a society to change how history is taught and written about – and hence render historical narratives more inclusive.
- The decision to frame certain histories as 'difficult' can lead to a value-based or simplified binary that excludes other dimensions of a necessarily complex engagement with the past.

- Innovative cross-sector activities, such as partnership programmes between museums and schools, offer a means for prompting new and diverse types of audience engagement with difficult subject matter.

This report highlights the importance of taking a cross-sector approach to 'difficult histories', drawing on inputs from policymakers, academia, education, heritage practice, and a range of other relevant stakeholders in the community.



I.

A Review

1

Does history matter?

National identity and critical history

In the British context, ideological legacies of our past have formed the subject of intense discussion and deliberation in recent decades. Many of these conversations have taken place within the public domain and mainstream media. Government policy instructs schools, universities, museums, and other public bodies to react, recover and re-present the past to a population that is increasingly heterogeneous in social, ethnic and religious categories. In an increasingly diverse society, understandings of history influence how different groups identify themselves and experience a sense of belonging.

Governments, individuals and communities utilise history as a means of maintaining and shaping identities. But where previous understandings of the past no longer resonate with contemporary societal values, critical history perspectives call for reassessment. Most histories include elements of tragedy, violence or injustice, and 'difficult histories' approaches seek to acknowledge these and to promote positive changes to curricula, curation and the spaces of public history, in response.

But the question of what this more complicated interpretation of history is, and how it resonates (and should be taught) in this country, is still contested. How does broadening our knowledge of the past affect our sense of belonging and the way we imagine our own affiliations with community, place and nation?

Defining history

'History can be done by academics in universities, curators in museums, researchers in the media, family historians, freelance local historians working for themselves or local authorities, or people who are interested in a particular area and set about finding out more by their own means' (Moody, 2015: 114–115).

In its broadest sense, history is about representing the past. The past is never fixed, so relevant accounts of what has gone before are socially produced (and reproduced) according to specific spatial, temporal, social, political and cultural contexts (Hobsbawm, 1998; Jordanova, 2000; Cannadine, 2002; Tosh, 2015). For historian David Cannadine, 'history makes plain the complexity and contingency of human affairs and the range and variety of human experience' (Cannadine, 2008: 5). It exists as a subject for use and abuse by individuals, groups, and nations (Macmillan, 2009; Evans, 2001). At the national level, historical narratives are distributed through official, state-sanctioned sites. As detailed later in this report, sites and narratives work in tandem to give legitimacy to contemporary political alignments, thereby preserving dominant group interests (Connerton, 1989; Wertsch, 2000).

...'[H]istory makes plain the complexity and contingency of human affairs and the range and variety of human experience' (David Cannadine, 2008: 5).

Academic historians have a professional responsibility to convey the past as something that is not one-sided or simple, but multi-faceted and complex. Through enquiry, they utilise evidence responsibly and systematically. They (ought to) construct arguments and deliver rounded analyses that are capable of illuminating the mindset of past generations (Wertsch, 2002). But there is always a risk that they might follow their own biases or political inclinations in selecting and presenting materials, as well as in the resulting conclusions.

By continuously questioning and challenging different perspectives, historians contribute towards ongoing discourses and changing insights about the past (Moody, 2015: 125). In the face of simplistic nationalist myths, they seek to add objective depth, as well as to illuminate the moral dilemmas of the past (Cannadine, 2013). Engaging with these predicaments is a vital

component in helping a society to deal with conflicted histories, as a means of overcoming social tensions, prejudice and division.

History within the memory and heritage boom

The conception of history as a subject in isolation is gradually changing. The rise of Memory Studies and Heritage Studies, for instance, has blurred traditional disciplinary lines. For example, heritage is widely defined as the commercialisation and commodification of the past, something that can be performed in settings for consumption by a mass audience (Ashworth et al., 2007). It is now seen as an essential component of ownership and belonging as a form of identity.

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From a Memory Studies perspective, groups and individuals express memory to galvanise themselves into building shared forms of identity. Social memory is a concept that explores links between social identity and historical memory (French, 1995). Knowledge and relevance of the social past are maintained through social memory, with narrative harnessed to relay experiences of the past (Halbwachs, 1992; Cubitt, 2007; Assmann, 2012).

For historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, memory has become a marketable commodity for the media (Chakrabarty, 2000, 2007), and this has coincided with a move towards incorporating previously hidden memories into popular culture. Through its capacity to nuance the past, memory provides: 'a means of persuasion that is instantaneous and which speaks to the democratic temporal horizon of "now", in contrast to the

discipline of history's long insistence on a logic of persuasion, that demands the time-consuming process of marshalling evidence as proof for an argument that looks towards the temporal horizon of "not yet" (Attwood, 2011: 171).

The remit of 'difficult histories'

'Difficult histories' form an interlinked strand of the historical discipline, whilst speaking to debates across and between sectors and academic divides. Museum practitioner Julia Rose has proposed the following motivations for addressing 'difficult histories' as silenced or forgotten histories (2016: 50–51):

- Advocacy
- Citizenship
- Commemorate
- Create memories
- Create, sustain or modify identities
- Demonstrate respect
- Educate
- Grieve
- Honour
- Hope
- Inform
- Inspire critical action, advocacy and social improvement
- Inspire empathy
- Instruct
- Moral concern for others
- Motivate research
- Offer of an apology
- Offer of reparations
- Peace education
- Provide inspirational resolve
- Provide social affirmation
- Raise tensions for learning
- Remember
- Remember compassionate justice
- Renew memories

- Resolve
- Social justice education
- Therapeutic reminiscence work
- Validate visitors' understandings or challenge understandings
- Warn against future violence
- Work through suffering

Uncovering, expanding and elevating long-silenced and painful histories requires the re-addressing of dominant historical narratives. However, interpretation is not without risk, at both the personal and the political level. There is an imperative for historical practitioners to avoid insensitivity and unnecessary provocation. Indeed, organisations can prove reluctant to contest the collective memory of a valued history, particularly when this might risk loss of funding.¹

For those practitioners choosing to interpret 'difficult histories', an initial inquisitiveness, coupled with a willingness to learn along the way, is of paramount importance. They are responsible for communicating their findings effectively to the public:

'History workers sensitive to the powerful tools of history interpretation can use difficult histories to elevate and remember the forgotten communities, shape social justice ideologies and educational aims, advocate for human rights, reveal silenced histories, aid those who are grieving, keep history current and relevant, strengthen individual and community identities, teach concern for others, and help society distinguish between immoral and moral living' (Rose, 2016: 61).

Various pedagogical strategies are deployed to prompt ethical and empathetic responses. Naturally, their deployment will vary according to whether a particular site has witnessed suffering directly. It also depends on the availability of authentic historical material suitable for learner interpretation (such as the opportunity to display personal possessions in an exhibition, to individualise experience of an event).²

1. As a result of funding cuts and lack of public investment, UK local, regional, and national museums are increasingly not in a position to take risks (see Pickford, 2018; O'Keefe, 2018). One example of a museum that sought to embrace 'difficult histories' was the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol. Opened in 2002, this institution closed to the public only six years later, with its collections transferred into the care of Bristol City Council.

2. Those will be governed by resources dedicated to research and collections. Rose records the need to keep the familiar 'strange', in order to 'maintain the tensions in learning difficult histories and to encourage learners' imaginations' (Rose, 2016: 125).

3. 'Resistance' constitutes one of five interlinked strands of Rose's 'Comm-emorative Museum Pedagogy' framework, alongside 'Reception', 'Repetition', 'Reflection' and 'Reconsideration' (Rose, 2016: 72). This learning framework addresses the development and delivery of interpreting 'difficult histories', placing emphasis on meaningful interactions between visitors and those based in the historical profession.

'Difficult histories' can highlight a capacity for cruelty, inhumanity, and injustice, but they can also validate endurance, bravery, and goodwill. Interpreting the subject matter of 'difficult histories', via a willingness of museum sites and civic spaces to acknowledge and engage with controversy, helps to generate public engagement. Such momentum is a powerful tool for changing cultural understanding and political positions, and for energising social change.

Learners and 'difficult histories'

Encountering presentations of 'difficult histories' offers an opportunity to change a learner's pre-existing beliefs or perspective. The content of these challenging histories may be hard to comprehend, since new information can contradict an existing understanding of the past. As a result, learner resistance can manifest itself, whenever this difficult knowledge 'disrupts the status quo of the learner's internal world and how the learner understands the external world' (Rose, 2016: 33–34).³ When trying to comprehend events that are immoral and often shocking, our instinctive response is often one of self-preservation (i.e. the rejection of new knowledge that contradicts our central beliefs).

Overwhelming encounters may actually shut down opportunities for further engagement with the subject – because the learner perceives the information as too difficult to understand or irrelevant. The burden of feeling challenged can see learners becoming frustrated or offended: 'When new knowledge is perceived as dissonant or disruptive to the learner's understanding of history, or challenges the learner's self-identity or moral senses, the learner will likely repress the new knowledge and outwardly react' (Rose, 2016: 81–82).

It should be no surprise that learners of 'difficult histories' do react. Those receiving new knowledge (especially within the setting of a museum) may feel remorseful, astonished, confused, angered, shocked, or shamed. They could harbour a sense

4.
Guilt represents a form of resistance, but can also be a step towards learning how to respond morally to others (Rose, 2016: 58).

of guilt or remorse for the suffering of others (Sontag, 2003).⁴ But herein lies the explicit mission of the ‘difficult histories’ approach: to foster dialogue and additional investigation, thereby generating new meanings through a different understanding of past events (Simon et al., 2000). As the basis for changing how we see the world and for reflecting on social reality, this can encourage more effective responses to present-day injustices and local or national divisions.

...the explicit mission of the ‘difficult histories’ approach: to foster dialogue and additional investigation, thereby generating new meanings through a different understanding of past events (Simon et al., 2000)

Although it is retrospective and does involve risk, the interpretation and learning of ‘difficult histories’ is a hopeful enterprise. Demonstrating how histories affect contemporary society is a novel way of redefining how we learn about the past. A sustained exchange between learners and authoritative interpretation offers hope for future reflection and a chance to heal longstanding wounds.

2

History and identity formation in schools

Teaching and learning history

Teaching and learning about history can be difficult. Within an educational setting, history is a subject primed to effect change in young people (Simon, 2005; Hopkins, 2010). Principally, this is thanks to the power of historical reasoning. Learning about the past helps with developing the individual skills required for objective critical enquiry (e.g. scrutinising evidence and understanding the implications of bias). This kind of enquiry equips students to gauge historical significance, by exploring the impacts of change or events on individuals, groups, and nations. Such a conviction implies that young citizens will be better situated to understand their own place in the world, and to reflect on their responsibilities for shaping the future, by studying history.

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In September 2014, a new National Curriculum for Schools in England came into force. The History Curriculum received much scrutiny, following contentious decisions by the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove, that were widely perceived as selecting celebratory narratives of Britain's 'Island story' for a nationalist, conservative agenda (Mansell, 2013). There were disputes and criticism around promoting British identity as something that, at best, sanitised – and at worst, erased – the legacies of the imperial past.

5. For broader outcomes from a survey on the teaching of history within both primary and secondary schools in England, see *Historical Association Survey into History Teaching in English Primary Schools* (The Historical Association, 2017) and *Historical Association Annual Secondary Survey* (Burn and Harris, 2017). Both of these document issues of teacher responses to new curriculum requirements, alongside concerns about the effects of budget cuts, and new methods for reassessing how pupil progress in the subject is monitored and developed. The Historical Association exists as a portal for published/online resources, as well as offering...

The outcomes of these conversations prompted discussion around reimagining British history and identity, with particular reference to the role of multicultural communities, migration, and the ‘hidden histories’. Confronting ‘difficult histories’ adds intricacy to the traditional function of history within modern nation-states, which was to sustain a collective understanding of an agreed past (Gross and Terra, 2018b). As Knauer and Walkowitz discern, ‘postcolonial interrogations of race and national identity exist in ongoing tension with surprisingly durable modernist notions of a unified nation-state’ (Knauer and Walkowitz, 2009: 2).

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The UK has made progress towards teaching more diverse histories in classrooms, as a result of narratives that called certain aspects of the country’s national past into question (Cannadine et al., 2011). Delivering these uncomfortable histories should be considered ‘a way of creating a subject that engages all students in order to prepare children for life as adults in multicultural Britain’ (Alexander et al., 2015: 3).

Nevertheless, with the curriculum already crammed, and its overall coherence being a key priority, concerns remain about how to enrich it, so as to reflect a range of ethnicities, backgrounds, and nationalities (Alexander et al., 2012; Mohamud and Whitburn, 2014; Heath, 2018).⁵ Questions have been raised about an imbalance between ‘comforting’ and ‘challenging’ narratives (particularly regarding relationships with former British Colonies), and about the extent to which histories are being used to illuminate contemporary social issues.⁶ For teachers post Key Stage 3, there is also a juggling act required, when trying to foster genuine understanding, against the

(cont.) support and training for teaching professionals, for example through its annual Teacher Fellowship Programme.

6. For example, see Aragon (2014) on educating children about racism.

7. For a case study on efforts to undermine dominant societal narratives, see Shuster's 2018 report on how the subject of slavery is now being taught in American schools.

unquestioned prominence of knowledge gain required for formal assessments.

‘Difficult histories’ in the classroom: teachers

'The study of history can be emotive and controversial where there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past...where there are disparities between what is taught in school history, family/community history and other histories. Such issues and disparities create a strong resonance with students in particular educational settings' (Wrenn et al., 2007: 4).

‘Difficult histories’ have been examined extensively in the field of Education Studies, with targeted areas of concern including ‘sensitive pasts’, the marginalisation of groups, and the ambition of reconciliation (see Cole, 2007; McCully, 2012; Zembylas, 2015; Van Boxtel et al., 2016). This has illustrated the importance of pedagogical issues in making the subject matter pertinent to a classroom audience. The teacher (or educator) is the gatekeeper in sharing information, seeking to enable the class to encounter a topic collectively and subsequently to navigate towards a new outlook.⁷

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‘Difficult histories’ evoke differing emotions in the classroom. Responses of one kind or another are a prerequisite for progress, though these vary according to the cultural identities and affiliations of the young people involved (Jonker, 2012; Epstein and Peck, 2018; Metzger and Harris, 2018). The expectation on challenging existing beliefs can also be problematic for teachers. Individuals may feel anxious or uncertain in their facilitator

8. Equally, the inclusion of a topic in the curriculum typically generates increased availability of new teaching resources, as well as mainstream programming from museums and historic sites.

role, due to a subject's current resonance, the potential for emotionally charged responses, or in transcending narrow views of identity. When making use of discussion as a means for addressing controversial subjects, they may feel unable or inadequately prepared to intervene by challenging beliefs or handling unpredictable reactions (Hand and Levinson, 2012; Kello, 2016; Zembylas, 2017). Coupled to this is the need for detailed subject knowledge – a resource not always readily accessible.⁸

A report was commissioned by the Historical Association in 2007 (supported by the Department for Education and Skills) to map out potential resistance to, and good practice for, teaching 'difficult histories'. In the report, Wrenn et al. examined the teaching of 'Emotive and Controversial History' over the 3–19 age range. They considered a number of case study topics, such as 'Britain and the Slave Trade', and the teaching of emotive issues concerning Muslim history. Several recommendations were made, which remain apposite today:

- Giving attention to initial teacher education and continuing professional development (CPD)
- Through planned themes and approaches, ensuring that teaching is 'a whole school issue and not an aspect addressed sporadically through individual subjects'
- Providing teachers with encouragement and guidance when it comes to improving teaching, including guidance on debate and risk taking when faced with external challenges from parents and communities
- Improving the range and quality of resources and the evidence base available, to enable a more varied, relevant curriculum (Wrenn et al., 2007: 41–42).

'Difficult histories' in the classroom: learners

For learners themselves, personal narratives are frequently utilised within 'difficult histories'. These are designed to

9. The medium of drama operates as a multi-vocal tool for exploring conflict as a theme, evidenced by the Historical Association's 2017 'The Partition of India' history project (Elahi, 2017a, 2017b)

10. Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council between 2008 and 2014, this project was orchestrated by The Runnymede Trust, in partnership with the Department of Sociology at the London School of Economics, the University of Manchester and the Department of South Asian History at the University of Cambridge. It produced an interactive website, podcasts and three 'Migration Stories' Community Booklets. See www.makinghistories.org.uk/for-teachers-community-stories.html

inspire identification, dialogue, and emotional empathy as an engagement strategy for understanding (Watson, 2016; Nordgren, 2017). Some have queried its moral dimensions, suggesting that the presentation of inclusionary histories through individual identities can lack broader plurality. This may prevent young people from adopting critical distance, beyond any practical constraints such as class size (Nordgren and Johansson, 2015; Van Boxtel et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the approach is an effective, practitioner-preferred way of granting insight and facilitating engagement with a nation's past.⁹

One particularly popular approach has been the use of family histories and migration stories that are directly sourced and researched by young people.

One particularly popular approach has been the use of family histories and migration stories that are directly sourced and researched by young people. For example, the 'Making Histories' project, involving 210 students from colleges, high schools, and academies, trained young people to conduct oral history interviews in Leicester, Sheffield and Cardiff.¹⁰ This initiative sought to stimulate individual interest in social, community, and family histories, reflecting the diverse local histories of Britain.

Additionally, during 2014-18, an array of educational projects were undertaken to commemorate the centenary of the First World War across the UK. Often incorporating immediate surroundings (such as a local war memorial), some events or activities were tied to curriculum material, whilst others existed as extra-curricular activities with community partners – but they have all informed and enabled students to pursue their own inquiries.¹¹

The desired outcomes from such initiatives are twofold: the learner contextualises individual stories within the wider historical period; and then accesses this to comprehend (and

(cont.)
and... <https://www.runnymede-trust.org/projects-and-publications/education/making-histories.html>

11.
For examples, see Abbott and Grayson (2011) regarding a project that focused on veteran experiences of the Second World War at Hemel Hempstead. See also Pennell's empirical study on teaching the history of the First World War in UK classrooms (Pennell, 2014), and for discussion about the UK government's programme to engage young people in the subject of the First World War via battlefield tourism, especially on tensions between education and remembrance (Pennell, 2018a; 2018b).

12.
For discussion around victimisation, see Spalding, 2011.

question) the complexities of the past. Rather than the pure accumulation of knowledge, this understanding is paramount to encounters with 'difficult histories' in the classroom (Segall, 2014; Pearce, forthcoming).

'Difficult histories' beyond the classroom

'Difficult histories' are also being developed for classes in other settings. This coincides with educational programming benefiting numerous heritage sites, as a means of redefining their purpose. At the bequest of the UK government, sites maintained by different organisations (including Historic Royal Palaces) were tasked with increasing their audience intake, in order to become more self-sufficient in light of reduced state funding (Malcolm-Davies, 2004). Debate ensued around how cognitive learning could be integrated successfully into the entertainment formats required for a commercial leisure industry.

Though there is a risk of portraying individuals solely as victims, personal stories from the past are regularly presented to help individualise large-scale historical events for school groups, and to make them more accessible.¹² Different viewpoints, as historical sources, serve to illustrate the complexity of the past. Objects from the past offer additional evidential focal points for discussion in tailored learning sessions. Performance and interpretive media work, in combination, can also be effective at conveying understandings of the past to learning audiences.

Museum Studies scholar Ceri Jones has assessed an educational presentation of the past within the context of medieval re-enactors at the Tower of London. She noted how students' prior conceptions about the past 'modified the potential impact of the living-history performances' (Jones, 2014: 230). This research suggested that what was learned in the classroom could conflict with encounters at the living-history site – meaning that, where ideas were challenged, young people often reverted to (and hence reinforced) their preconceptions about the past (Jones, 2014: 231). Jones reasoned that young people can view the

past through the distorted mirror of the present, ‘compounded by their tacit understanding of progress as meaning “to get better” rather than “to change”’ (Jones, 2014: 232). This indicates a need for educative historic sites to act as spaces ‘where young people should be able to discuss and express their ideas about the past, to engage with the experts, to be immersed in the past, and to have their ideas challenged in a way to which they will respond positively’ (Jones, 2014: 233; see also Gregory and Witcomb, 2007).

...what was learned in the classroom could conflict with encounters at the living-history site – meaning that, where ideas were challenged, young people often reverted to (and hence reinforced) their preconceptions about the past (Ceri Jones, 2014: 231)

Although there is still work to be done in harmonising identification with objective, detached thinking, ‘difficult histories’ help to inform young people’s lives and to shape their sense of identity. The way in which they are linked to a nation’s history is always changing, with new narratives constantly altering understanding and reverberating with contemporary relevance.

3

Contesting history in public spaces

Public presentations of history

‘Difficult histories’ issues do not only manifest in the classroom and at historic sites. As Logan and Reeves put it, most societies have their ‘scars of history resulting from involvement in war and civil unrest or adherence to belief systems based on intolerance, racial discrimination or ethnic hostilities’ (Logan and Reeves, 2009a: 1).

Though potentially dormant, the legacies of the past exist in everyday public spaces and cityscapes that are shared by multiple communities (Foote, 2003; Knauer and Walkowitz, 2009; Pullan and Baillie, 2013).¹³ There is potential for custodians – such as government bodies or heritage organisations – to harvest these for promoting engagements with the past through the medium of place. In championing the past as a resource with contemporary resonance, these organisations establish or support select national myths that may act to reinforce shared values and identities.

Postcolonial theory has done much in critiquing and revising this understanding. However, to what extent has it impacted on dominant discourses within public presentations of history? Through their commemorative form, sites such as public monuments, memorials or statues can still reproduce celebratory or glorifying narratives, allowing some individuals or groups to gain a sense of belonging from historical developments and their connection to them. Conversely, others may feel excluded – they might struggle to derive a similar sense of meaning and identity from the same site (this may be on the grounds of religion, race, political viewpoints, social values, cultural heritage, or memory).

As moral sensitivities change, conflicted meanings can result in dissonance or division. Place, therefore, functions as a vehicle for

13. For an insightful guide to thinking about historical legacies, including a ‘Decision Tree Management Tool for Contested Histories in Public Spaces’, see Conn, 2018.

memory. What a site means to a public or to the communities that engage with it is not universal or fixed, but changes over (and as a result of) time. The symbols within these public spaces are the means through which a community expresses its values. As a result, to contest public narratives of the past is to ask questions about these symbols and spaces in the present (see Purbrick et al., 2007; Logan and Reeves, 2009b). Contestation brings political, cultural, and ethical consequences. As Hodgkin and Radstone note:

'The focus of contestation, then, is very often not conflicting accounts of what happened in the past so much as the question of who or what is entitled to speak for that past in the present. The attempt to resolve meaning in the present is thus often a matter of conflicts over representation' (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2006a: 1).

Public spaces in the UK feature history that may now be considered problematic, and hence subject to reassessment. The act of challenging these presentations of the past has been enacted via mass media channels, targeted learning programmes, renewed interpretation, or acts of protest, as outlined below.

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The past in the present: contesting historical narratives

The following examples demonstrate how contested histories and memories involve both struggle and change, evidencing how the reading of sites can change over time:

- An article on the *BBC News* website sought to raise public awareness of the fact that most prominent street names in Glasgow's city centre are named after 18th-century slave owners who made their fortunes through tobacco plantations (BBC, 2018c).

- In 2017, the National Trust embarked on a themed programme called ‘Challenging Histories’. This explores the more hidden aspects and overlooked histories of its properties around the UK, through exhibitions, events, and storytelling. Throughout 2019, it considered locations where people have fought to express and contest their political and social rights (National Trust, 2019).
- Amidst the First World War centenary commemorations, the group ‘Ensuring We Remember’ successfully lobbied for the creation of a national memorial in London to the 96,000 volunteers of the Chinese Labour Corps (Ensuring We Remember, 2019).
- In London’s Hyde Park, the Royal Air Force Bomber Command Memorial was vandalised in January 2019, for the fourth time in six years (BBC, 2019).

There are commonalities across all four of these examples:

I. They all adopt grievance as a way of interrogating the past and deploying it to present effect.

By providing a warning about what could happen or has already happened, ‘difficult histories’ prefigure what could recur or continue (Black, 2014: 139). All four examples constitute ‘publicly accessible’ histories that are indicative of the remarkable general interest in, and engagement with, the past (see Ashton and Kean, 2012). The historian Jay Winter has suggested that this public history is entangled with a ‘memory boom’ that has furthered presentations of the past in public arenas and formats, such as historic sites, television series, and online material (Winter, 2007). A shifting boundary between amateur and professional historians has pre-empted an increased interest in recovering victim stories. The embracing of more marginal ‘hidden’ histories endeavours to complicate mainstream perceptions.¹⁴

Such scrutiny can be understood as a way of approaching ‘difficult histories’ – an opportunity to remedy omission, be that deliberate or unintentional. What is more, public history can actively shape how the past is represented in civic spaces, when based on anticipated audiences.

14. Conversely, public history can be deployed to reaffirm pre-existing beliefs. See Moody (2015) for detailed definitions of ‘Public History’, ‘Heritage’, and ‘History’.

As Knauer and Walkowitz explain:

'All too often, politicians, scholars, and other professionals refer to 'the public' as though it were a unified, homogenous mass with a single set of values and interests. In multiracial and multi-ethnic societies, race, class, gender and citizenship status, among other factors, shape individuals' investment in relationship to the public sphere – including debates over public history sites. It is perhaps more accurate and helpful to conceive of multiple publics with divergent and often competing interests and different stakes in how histories are represented' (Knauer and Walkowitz, 2009: 3).

2. They are linked by their use of commemoration, in one guise or another.

Commemoration is the symbolic act of recognising and honouring the memory of someone or something through organised collective instruction. Memorialisation functions as a symbolic drive to acknowledge particular episodes and figures from history. It may be official or unofficial – the latter would include the murals created on gable walls by Protestant and Catholic neighbourhoods in Belfast.¹⁵ Crucially, commemorative activity requires an audience. Whatever message is being conveyed, it has to resonate with the values and understanding of those who encounter it. This puts it in tension with education, because what is being communicated may close down alternative understandings, through reaffirming (rather than redressing) historical narratives.

3. They have each capitalised on the presence of platforms that can enact change via mass involvement and (mainstream) support.

The ability to interact and speak out on a significant scale (through social media outlets) can chime with campaign movements and media coverage, to generate significant public interest and momentum for action.

15. These utilised public space to demarcate ownership and embed historical and religious symbols onto the urban fabric. For expansion, see Hill and White, 2012; Jarman, 1997, 1999.

Difficult colonial histories

The most prominent recent example of ‘difficult histories’ within public spaces has been that of activist movements seeking to remove statues as legacies of the colonial past.

In April 2015, a statue of the British colonialist Cecil Rhodes was removed from the University of Cape Town (South Africa). This was the culmination of a high-profile Twitter campaign (*#RhodesMustFall*) and student-led protests, calling for the decolonisation of higher education (Fairbanks, 2015; Priestland, 2015; Chaudhuri, 2016). The movement sparked extensive global conversations around the role, accountability, and position of colonial beneficiaries in contemporary society, and about how their respective legacies might be mediated.¹⁶

16.
For discussion, see Johnson, 2014; Knudsen and Andersen, 2019; Schmahmann, 2016.

In summer 2015, nine black Americans were murdered in a South Carolina church. This hate crime likewise attracted extensive public attention and media coverage around the Confederate flag, with which the attacker had been pictured on his website shortly before the shooting. It was essentially a national discussion about the flag’s symbolism, in terms of how it made Americans feel, what it taught, and the impact it had on different groups of United States (US) citizens (Peers, 2015; Fitzhugh, 2018). For some, the flag was a symbol of free speech; for others, it was a symbol of white supremacy. Such new-found awareness and empowerment – to discuss and challenge potent symbols – ignited conversations around the statues of prominent Confederate leaders, which had previously been largely ignored. In May 2017, monuments of Robert E Lee and Jefferson Davis (amongst others) were removed by the authorities in New Orleans, Louisiana.

In August 2017, in Durham (North Carolina), a crowd toppled a bronze Confederate soldier monument. Meanwhile, a rally of white supremacists clashed with students and activists on the University of Virginia campus. The rally participants were angered by the city council’s decision in February to remove a statue of Lee from a Charlottesville park. One pro-Confederate

17. In 2017, an active member of the Cape Town #RhodesMustFall campaign accepted a Rhodes scholarship to study at Oxford (Pells, 2017). Knudsen and Andersen highlight a fundamental difference between the Cape Town and Oxford campaigns, with their analysis of Facebook evidencing that 'RMF in Oxford was a forum of debate whilst UCT: RMF was a space of political mobilization to concrete actions' (Knudsen and Andersen, 2019: 254).

18. In 2006, a renaming proposal in Liverpool was dropped, partly because it would have meant renaming Penny Lane (named to commemorate a slave ship owner, but now recognised as the title of a famous song by The Beatles).

rally member drove his car into a group of protestors, killing one and injuring 19 others (Morgan, 2018: 153; Gross and Terra, 2018b).

These illustrations convey pressure to erase visible reminders of uncomfortable pasts tied to racism, slavery, injustice, oppression, or violence. In the UK, there has been less potent momentum to destabilise hegemonic heritage narratives – witness the unsuccessful campaign to remove a statue of Rhodes at Oriel College, Oxford, in 2016. Tensions between Rhodes as a philanthropist for education and international scholars, versus his actions as a leading imperialist and racist, promoted discussion amongst the British public, but ultimately, judgement was cast in line with current majority moral sensibilities around the country's colonial legacies (Latif, 2016; Lemon, 2016).¹⁷

Often, these sensibilities are expressed as a sense of local identity and what it means to affiliate with a specific space in the present, though this may not be shared by all who interact with it. City-based authorities are responsible for responding to growing modern sentiments across a wide population spectrum, whilst simultaneously seeking to either re-contextualise or preserve factual history. The challenges associated with this have played out in several UK cities, via activist calls for university and civic buildings with ties to colonialism to be renamed (Saner, 2017).¹⁸

Removing statues, and thus reshaping public space and commemorative practice, is one way of addressing 'difficult histories'. However, some have expressed concerns that expunging the name of individuals – in a reactionary, self-congratulatory gesture of liberal idealism – does nothing to right past wrongs (Lowry, 2016).

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past wrongs (Lowry, 2016; see also Edmonds, 2019). Instead, it allows the past (and the values held during the period of construction) to be forgotten. Responding to the Confederate statues debate, Mallett posits: ‘Would building monuments to more leaders of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, or perhaps even slaves who fought for their freedom, shape public memory in more enduring ways?’ (Mallett, 2018b: 222). For others, the importance of such atonement movements is not about generating guilt or cleansing traces of troubled pasts, but about permitting a more nuanced discussion about history, race, and inequality in present society, with the aim of transforming identity politics.

Whilst public monuments and sites are recognised as material memory, loaded with meaning, the increased empowerment of previously-silenced individuals aids the re-evaluation and diversification of our understandings of national identity. Acknowledging and articulating our difficult pasts can lead the way to greater truth and reconciliation – if decision-makers tasked with confronting them are willing to do so, effectively and responsibly.

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4

Confronting and Managing the past

Coming to terms with conflicting pasts

'Whether present concerns involve commemorating the dead, constructing a past in which a society can take pride, or shaping a society's way forward, they all involve negotiation. The voices of the many diverse elements in modern society compete to be heard and remembered. Whether remembrance arises from small communities or national public spaces, from authoritarian state propaganda or the most prominent industry of memory in the world, how the public remembers war says more about those who remember than it does about who or what they are remembering' (Mallett, 2018a: 9).

Public bodies and institutions are tasked with confronting and representing contentious histories (Lehrer et al., 2011). In order to achieve acceptance for their narratives, such bodies need to portray contentious histories critically and accurately, without undermining individual biographies or the experiences of communities involved. Managing these pasts involves broaching boundaries and working across sectors. They can easily take on a momentum of their own within the public domain.

Mobilising and managing war memory in post-conflict societies is a difficult business that affects 'international relations, intergenerational relations and personal and national identity' (Hashimoto, 2011: 243). Encounters raise important issues about the extent to which the past is being over-managed and controlled, to the point that the past cannot be questioned without repercussion.

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For example, the recent conclusion of the First World War centenary commemorations saw muted controversies in the UK over contemporary representations and manipulations of the conflict. Commentators have highlighted the championing of British national identity through commemorative endeavours (see Mycock, 2014; Hough et al., 2016; Katwala, 2018; Kidd and Sayner, 2018; Strachan, 2018). Continued discussions around the political appropriation of wearing a poppy showcase deep-rooted sensitivities around what this act might symbolise (Ramsay, 2018; Edwards, 2018). Some contend that its political nature is akin to promoting and justifying conflict, essentially silencing protest by demanding national unity. Others have advocated wearing the alternative white poppy, distributed by the pacifist organisation Peace Pledge Union.

Continued discussions around the political appropriation of wearing a poppy showcase deep-rooted sensitivities... (Ramsay, 2018; Edwards, 2018).

Another noticeable incident in the build-up to the 2018 Armistice commemorations was the online threat by the President of the Student Union at the University of Southampton to paint over a 1916 First World War mural (Binding and Mercer, 2018). A public outcry followed over the perceived attempt to eradicate and disrespect history, with a petition calling for her to resign signed by over 21,000 individuals, before the individual subsequently stood down (BBC, 2018d).

Beyond the UK, amidst a nationalist turn across Europe, there has been an extensive international backlash to the so-called 'Poland Holocaust Law', as an attempt to deny or blur historical truth about Poland's role in the Second World War (Henley, 2018). Having made it a criminal offence to accuse Poland of complicity in Nazi war crimes in early 2018, this law was later amended to a civil offence by the Polish Prime Minister (BBC, 2018a; Davies, 2018). In December 2018, a Polish veterans' association and a Second World War, Polish resistance fighter

won a court case against the producers of the German TV drama series, *Generation War: Our Mothers and Fathers* (Poland In, 2018). The popular series had been commended by viewers, internationally, for its realistic portrayal of violence, and moreover, for its honest depiction of Germany's recent past – though some critics contended that Germany's central role in the Holocaust was diminished. The court complaint looked at scenes suggesting that the Polish Home Army had been complicit in crimes against the Jewish people. A District Court in Krakow ruled that the producers must broadcast apologies on Polish and German television, and pay €4,500 in compensation.

'Difficult histories' and conflict go hand in hand, as Gegner and Ziino have noted:

'If heritage can be understood as the selective use of the past as cultural and political resources in the present, then there are few fields more productive for understanding that process than the heritage of war' (Gegner and Ziino, 2012: 1).

Having heritage remains integral to identity, in 'affirming the right to exist in the present and continue into the future' (Macdonald, 2009: 2). But the tendency is to polarise perpetration and victimhood, and for sites to turn remembrance 'into a form of commemoration that eschews blame and avoids addressing the political contexts that created the oppression' (Watson, 2018: 787; see also Apor, 2014; Orr, 2017).

...war memorials may encourage remembrance of sacrifice, but they do not address the origins of conflict (see Ashworth, 2008)

To contextualise this, war memorials may encourage remembrance of sacrifice, but they do not address the origins of conflict (see Ashworth, 2008). In efforts to address past grievances within the context of Romania's communist past, Watson suggests that the country may only come to terms with this legacy, 'if it is able to create a formal method of remembering that enables both perpetrators as well as victims to tell their

stories' (Watson, 2018: 791–792). Direct engagement with the motives and actions of those who inflicted suffering, alongside the narratives of victims' stories, offers an opportunity to mobilise memory for reconciliation.

This need to resolve diverse national and transnational memories remains a controversial and politicised topic. Two of the defeated nations in the Second World War have adopted different paths to moral recovery and to confronting stigmatising and humiliating memories:

'Japan sought the path of overcoming Hiroshima to become a respected pacifist nation, and Germany sought that of overcoming the Holocaust as a respected repentant nation'
(Hashimoto, 2011: 243; see also Yoneyama, 1999; Warren, 2015).

'Difficult histories' within Germany

The cumulative weight of Germany's recent past has seen many academics contemplate the country's experiences post-1945 and post-1990 (Niven, 2002; Rosenfeld and Jaskot, 2008; Schroeder, 2013; Peitsch and Sayner, 2015; Nießer and Tomann, 2018; see also McGuinness, 2019). With the reconstruction of its Frauenkirche church, completed in 2005, there has been notable focus on Dresden as a symbol of post-unification reconciliation with the past (for instance, see Fuchs, 2012; Joel, 2012; Rehberg and Neutzner, 2015).

Previously, and based on extensive research into how the city of Nuremberg had dealt with its Nazi legacy, cultural anthropologist Sharon Macdonald's 'Difficult Heritage' work contributed much to thinking about public acknowledgement of past atrocities in the country (Macdonald, 2009, 2015). In contrast to identity-affirmative heritage (which looks to convey triumphs and sacrifice), Macdonald's work assessed how contemporary identities are negotiated and shaped in the face of starkly visible, concrete reminders of Nazi architecture, particularly through the interplay of neglect, identity, memory and forgetting.

19. Macdonald cites the trend for companies involved in the Second World War – such as Audi and Volkswagen – to address perpetration openly, through permanent exhibitions, as an act of self-disclosure and moral cleanliness (Macdonald, 2015: 16–17).

Macdonald pitched ‘Difficult Heritage’ as a past that is contested and awkward for public reconciliation, but one that remains meaningful in the present (Macdonald, 2009: 1). What it delivers is a broader educative message about the need for ‘continual unsettlement’ (Macdonald, 2009: 192).¹⁹

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Germany’s merging of remembrance, reconciliation and reconstruction has, likewise, led sociologist Jeffrey Olick to reflect:

‘The politics of regret is indeed a salutary development, something new in history; and its continued influence in Germany and elsewhere is to be celebrated... [T]he German case... is our best example of why the struggle over the legacy of the past, about the responsibility of the parents and the inheritance of the children, is so important’ (Olick, 2016: 468).

As a broader socio-cultural transformation, acknowledgement of past crimes or wrongdoing from one’s own history has become prevalent and internationalised. Moreover, it is regarded by (some) governments as a positive asset for contemporary national identity. For Germany, keeping visible reminders of wrongs, with their enduring ramifications for the present, establishes part of the philosophy known as ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’, or ‘coming to terms/coping with the past’ (see Mueller, 2010). This entails dually mastering and processing the past, in order to free oneself from its negative, potentially destructive influence.

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Case study: Commemorating the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery

During 2007, a prominent commemorative programme took place across Britain to acknowledge the bicentenary of the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807. It involved depicting and discussing a history that was (and remains) 'emotionally demanding, socially divisive and politically contentious' (Smith et al., 2010: 125; for expansion, see Reddie, 2007).

At the time, a group of heritage academics undertook research to assess visitor responses to the presentation of narratives and objects in slavery museums. Working with partner sites in London, Birmingham, Hull, Liverpool, and Bristol, the research sought to determine to what extent displays should be challenging and provocative for their visitors, and the implications of portraying alternative voices (Smith, 2010; Fouseki and Smith, 2013; see also Munroe, 2016). Whilst emphasising that 'everyone was connected and part of the history and legacy of the transatlantic slave trade', the exhibition planning process involved community activists and historians, and dedicated museum developments in Bristol and Liverpool (Wilson, 2010: 166).

The research findings suggested that, in their 'museological shaping', certain displays ended up implicitly promoting a selective version of the past (Arnold-de Simine, 2012; Araujo, 2012). By playing up the positive history of abolitionism and adopting an uncritical approach to the subjects of imperialism, race, and enslavement, the result essentially acted to reaffirm dominant perceptions held within British society.

As Laurajane Smith et al. explained:

'Museums strove to...persuade members of African and African-Caribbean British communities that their voices and memories and cultures and social perspectives were no longer to be excluded from the prevailing institutionally promoted narratives of Britishness; and to accredit the understanding of museums themselves as places given

over not to the promulgation of an authoritative view of history and national identity, but to the facilitation of debate and the recognition of multiple perspectives. These were not easily combinable objectives' (Smith et al., 2010: 125).

In some respects, this approach demonstrates the scope for co-operation between history and public memory. A degree of popular interest echoed a broader public agenda around racial equality, as well as rising concern about the contemporary issue of human trafficking. Whilst the resulting participation did help to nuance broader public memory of the slave trade, by looking at the slave experience and emancipation, it equally showcases the need for more honest and challenging museum interpretation.

5

Museums and 'difficult histories'

The function of museums and new museology

Museums and heritage sites are deployed as spaces to explore and where we can come to terms with difficult pasts. An infamous example concerns the Enola Gay display at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC, between 1993 and 1995. A commemorative exhibition, depicting an aeronautic history of the B-29 Bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, was scheduled for the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. A public controversy followed, around the memory of the historical event and the extent to which this historical episode should be remembered patriotically. It demonstrated the delicate balance required, in terms of audience reaction to the re-telling of historical events (see Thelen, 1995; Linenthal and Engelhardt, 1996).

Museums stand as sites of knowledge production and encounters between people and the material world. Serving as arbitrators of history, culture, and memory, they are central shapers of national, as well as local, identity (Watson, 2007; McLean, 2008; Bodo, 2012). Traditionally, their function lay in educational and socialising purposes to advance national discourses. Truthful but impartial representations, based on the authenticity of evidence, gave them credible, prestigious status (see Bennett, 1995; Boswell and Evans, 1999; Macdonald, 2003).

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In response to postmodern and postcolonial critiques, museums began to radically re-signify their position from the early 1990s, via ideological shifts, encompassed within what was termed 'New Museology' (see Vergo, 1989; Merriman, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Whilst amplified academic attention identified the contested nature of the museum (particularly in how it disseminated authority), government agendas and economic pressures called for more transparency in day-to-day museum practice.

A key to this reconceptualisation lay in distinguishing that visitors represented more than mere consumers of curatorial knowledge. Falk and Dierking's 1992 constructivist theory argued for taking visitors beyond pure factual assimilation, highlighting a need for personal connections with displayed material to create meaningful experiences. Museum practitioners reacted to meet the needs of a 'multiplicity of audiences with different motivations, levels of understanding and learning styles' (Black, 2012: 244). Institutions accordingly re-identified themselves as places for learning, community engagement, and embracing collaboration with new stakeholders.

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At a time when audiences began to matter as much as collections, issues of ownership began to surface in the form of cultural restitution for 'looted antiquities'. UK museums continue to participate in negotiations around repatriation for authentic objects (including human remains). The most high-profile contestation remains the 'Parthenon Sculptures' at the British Museum, a collection of Classical Greek marble sculptures that were originally part of the temple of the Parthenon and other buildings in Athens (Mackenzie, 2014; Russell-Cook and Russell, 2016; Jenkins, 2018b; see also Lowenthal, 2009).

Exhibition-making within historical institutions

New Museology brought innovation, inevitable structural and philosophical change, and a drastic power shift in the visitor–curator dynamic. Curators could no longer act as ‘the chief, and often sole decision-maker’ when it came to preparing exhibition content – now, audience expectation constituted an explicit presence in determining the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ of display (see Paddon, 2014: 38; Samis and Michaelson, 2017).

Curators could no longer act as ‘the chief, and often sole decision-maker’ when it came to preparing exhibition content – now, audience expectation constituted an explicit presence in determining the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ of display (see Paddon, 2014: 38; Samis and Michaelson, 2017).

20. It is worth noting the uniqueness of the historical museum’s reliance upon the tool of the written word to deliver its remit. Munroe describes narrative as a primary tool for historical displays as ‘the impossibility of capturing the “real” experiences of past agents means that a mediatory tool...is necessary to articulate a version of the past in the present’ (Munroe, 2016: 177).

Cultural geographer Karen Till defines exhibitions as ‘theatrical, staged spaces that perform selective versions of the past. Exhibition authors interpret the past by relating space, objects and written text in distinctive combinations’ (Till, 2001: 276). They represent an amalgamation of different semiotic resources for public consumption. Selecting what gets incorporated or excluded is regulated, meaning that strategies of display have the ability to empower or disempower particular groups – because interpretation assigns value to this complex spatial ordering of information (Maier-Wolthausen, 2009: 302; see also Legget, 2018). Facilitating learning experiences through such engagements still allows institutions to serve pedagogical and political purposes (see Ferguson, 1996; Kaplan, 1998; Simon, 2011).

For history museums, a malleable past is reworked and crafted through narrative format, as the cultural, social and political needs of the present change.²⁰ State-sponsored institutions remain ‘under pressure to produce exhibitions that portray national history in a celebratory tone and produce a shared national identity that excludes controversy and difference,

affirms civic pride and forms better citizens' (Cameron, 2007: 337). Individual stories and experiences are largely subsumed to deliver 'one historical experience of the nation as a single community' (Witcomb, 2003: 155).

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Accordingly, organisations can be reluctant to take risks or challenge the norms of their institutions, especially in light of day-to-day constraints. They may be fearful of their visitors' reaction to subjects such as slavery, massacres, war, and prejudice, and wary about ownership and appropriation, in terms of who can legitimately address these topics, and who they might need to involve (e.g. see Macdonald (Charlotte), 2009). Even for formats beyond exhibitions, such as learning programmes, these are equally governed by limited timeframes and ethical challenges in measuring the transformation impact upon their participants (Kidd, 2014: 7, 13).

Museums have clearly undergone enormous recent change, via an ongoing process of renewal and transformation that has brought about changes in priority and practice (see Cameron and Kelly, 2010). Existing at the public–private intersection, they 'represent public statements about what the past has been, and how the present should acknowledge it; who should be remembered, who should be forgotten' (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2006b: 23; see also Luke, 2002: 218-230; Lisle, 2006; Trofanenko, 2011).

Case study: The Imperial War Museum

'The work of providing museum learning around a contested history must be a constant negotiation between the subject, the resources and the audience' (Cairns, 2014: 196).

Historical museums retain a 'power to challenge people's ways of thinking and shift an individual's point of view' (Cameron, 2007: 339). But many are facing dilemmas in their identity; by engaging with 'difficult histories', they must seemingly determine the boundaries between museum, memorial, commemoration, and learning.

London's Imperial War Museum (IWM) exists as Britain's national museum of conflict. It was set up in 1917 to commemorate the First World War, by recording the involvement of all levels of society drawn into the conflict. It has since operated as a facility for simultaneously preserving and shaping understanding of that conflict (beyond its stewardship role in conserving collections).

The IWM serves a commemorative purpose, by ensuring that future generations will remember the individual efforts rendered between 1914 and 1918, as part of a national collective (Cornish, 2004; Wellington, 2017). An inherent tension remains in delivering this remit. On the one hand, there is an omnipresent aspect of 'never forgetting'; at the same time, visitors – who now bear witness to a century of subsequent conflict – are expected to come away thinking that they have learned about the follies and perils of warfare (Roppola, 2012: 242–244; see also Lennon, 1999; Cercel, 2018; Sodaro, 2018). The museum has to situate itself as neither a military museum nor a memorial, but as occupying an ambivalent commemorative space that invites reactions of remembrance amongst those who visit.

The institution remains well placed to deliver engagement with 'difficult histories', having recently set up an Institute for the Public Understanding of War and Conflict.²¹ Its track record of seeking to address challenging legacies is illustrated in the form of

21. <https://www.iwm.org.uk/iwm-institute>

a pioneering educational project titled 'Their Past, Your Future'. Instigated in 2004, it ran for six years. The premise involved students meeting and gathering eyewitness testimony from transnational veterans of the Second World War, as a means to explore how conflict is experienced and how it defines identity, as well as its long-term impact. The outcome helped to 'enhance the understanding of the impact and legacy of conflict and to encourage young people to be motivated to learn about the past and its relevance to the present and future' (Ryall, 2014: 187; see also Wolnik et al., 2017).

6

Peace, reconciliation, and positive identities

A ‘difficult histories’ approach engenders the potential to work through troubled pasts by using the past as a meaningful way to ask questions about our collective future. However, with the rise of extremism, migration, and displacements of populations across Europe, histories and heritage are increasingly being called upon to sustain regional and national identities (Mink, 2013). This is allowing intolerance and distrust to flourish. With the current uncertain and turbulent political climate, the UK is no exception.

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Making peace with the past

However, using cultural heritage with narratives of complex, unsettling histories can strengthen a commitment to learning, dialogue, and peace building. Some scholars, however, have pitched a counter-argument, questioning whether it is our moral duty to remember the past – however painful or divisive it may be – and contending that efforts to build peace may only end up reproducing conflict (Murphy, 2010). Commentator and writer David Rieff has proposed that, as collective remembrance can be toxic, and historical memory abused, it may be more moral to forget (Rieff, 2016; see also Forty, 1999).

The theme of forgetting as diplomacy is something that can take on contested transnational significance. Historian, Joan Beaumont, explains how the Changi Prisoner of War camp in Singapore was demolished in 2004, due to demands for local

22.
For expansion on heritage diplomacy and responsibility, see Huang and Lee, 2019; Marschall, 2010.

development (Beaumont, 2019). In spite of the site's significance as a site of memory for Second World War Australian identity, the decision was taken to pursue an approach of 'forget', rather than to 'regret' via preservation.²² Jeremy Black has ruminated on this dilemma:

"Making peace with history" is seen as a way to facilitate a post-colonial future, notably to confront the strains of multiculturalism, address human rights, and make transnationalism work... Looked at differently, the transference of responsibilities across the generations as a way to "heal" the past can serve largely for the reiteration of grievances. Moreover, the idea proposes a public history that is misleading as it offers an agreed narrative, with concomitant politicizing' (Black, 2014:189).

Hughes and Kostovicova are correspondingly fearful of the 'national amnesia' option at one end of the spectrum, versus the alternative being 'a corrosive permanent state of contesting the past and prosecuting past behaviour, depending on the political balance of power at any given time' (Hughes and Kostovicova, 2018: 623; see also Salter and Yousuf, 2016; Termin and Dahl, 2017). How the need to remember competes with the need to forget constitutes a real challenge for reconciliation and transitional justice approaches.

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Striving for hope: 'difficult histories' and peace narratives

It is palpable that divided communities carry contrasting experiences of the past, citing historical wounds to generate feelings of anguish, mistrust, and hatred. Moving towards a framework of reconciliation involves attaining a belief that the past can be understood differently. It allows critical lessons to be learned, thereby opening up opportunities to build a more

23. The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is a 'global network of historic sites, museums and memory initiatives that connect past struggles to today's movements for human rights'. See <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/home/>. The International Network of Museums for Peace is 'a worldwide network of peace museums, peace gardens and other peace related sites, centres and institutions that share in the same desire to build a global culture of peace' (www.ipb.org/members/international-network-of-museums-for-peace/). The IHJR was founded 'in the belief that addressing contentious or disputed historical legacies can promote...

peaceful future (see Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012; McConnell and Braniff, 2014; Zembylas et al., 2016). One example of apology reconciliation took place in Australia in February 2008, when the government chose to make a formal acknowledgement of past wrongs towards the indigenous Aboriginal population (BBC, 2008).

Moving towards a framework of reconciliation involves attaining a belief that the past can be understood differently. It allows critical lessons to be learned, thereby opening up opportunities to build a more peaceful future (see Bekerman and Zembylas, 2012; McConnell and Braniff, 2014; Zembylas et al., 2016).

Through initiatives such as the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR), the International Network of Museums for Peace, and the ongoing work of global NGOs and museums, peacebuilding is recognised as a way of transforming learning approaches to the legacy of troubled pasts.²³ A case in point has been the work of the independent NGO Cultural Heritage without Borders.²⁴ This organisation seeks to rescue and preserve cultural heritage affected by conflict, neglect, or human and natural disaster for reconciliation, working extensively in the Balkans (see also Herscher, 2011; Walters et al., 2017; Kostovicova and Biquelet, 2018).

Furthermore, museums are increasingly delivering instructive histories of oppression and injustice – so as to illustrate lessons for peace education – at sites such as the National Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta, Georgia (USA). Museums and exhibitions dedicated to peace are likewise on the rise, including the UK's Peace Museum in Bradford (see Allen and Sakamoto, 2013; Takenaka, 2014; Yoshida, 2014; Apsel, 2016; McKeown Jones et al., 2017). These kinds of institutions prioritise pedagogical reparations, by helping to elevate awareness and remedy forgiveness, with the vision of a better society in future.

(cont.)
understanding,
tolerance and
reconciliation
in divided
societies and
contribute
towards
peacebuilding
processes'
(<https://www.ihjr.org/ihjr-in-brief-2/>).

24.
<http://chwb.org/>

As a process, reconciliation involves an acknowledgement of the past, prior to an assessment of how we should remember any historical injustices or divisions that stem from it. Reconciliation features consistently within academic and policy debates on peacebuilding in the aftermath of conflict, although this scrutiny has termed it highly ambiguous and overly politicised (Hughes and Kostovicova, 2018: 622). Recent thinking has advocated reconciliation as an interdisciplinary spatial phenomenon, capable of intervention in repairing fractured social relations on reconciliation as decolonisation (Giblin, 2014; Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016; Harrowell, 2017; see also Rouhana, 2018). The fundamental requirement lies in managing the difficult history of a conflictual past, to nurture peacebuilding for the future.

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The contemporary climate has harboured a momentum for practitioner-based and institutional mechanisms to seek outcomes of social justice and transformative experience. Though partly about questioning taken-for-granted truths and revealing struggles, the pursuit of 'difficult histories' is undoubtedly an optimistic, hopeful enterprise. Its agendas involve open discussion and talking about past wrongs freely, as a means of moving forward.

Case study: Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

Drawing on research by Museum Studies scholar Elizabeth Crooke and geographer Sara McDowell, this case study briefly sketches the reconciliation effort behind an art installation in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, an area 'where dealing with the past has often been regarded as partisan, territorial and, at points, deeply antagonistic' (McDowell and Crooke, 2019: 2; for expansion, see Dawson, 2010; Horne and Madigan, 2013;

Lawther, 2014; Morrow, 2017; Neill, 2018; McBride, 2018). The work discusses the use of art to address 'open wounds' within a shared space, marked by 30 years of protracted, ethno-nationalist conflict (Till, 2012).

In March 2015, the artist David Best brought his work, *Temple*, to the city. What the installation offered to locals was 'an opportunity to move away from the binary labels of victims and perpetrators, so often a source of conflict in the political landscapes of post-Agreement Northern Ireland' (McDowell and Croke, 2019: 12; see also Mullan, 2018). The temporary installation attracted 60,000 residents to participate over its one-week opening. Success was manufactured through the artist's sustained engagement with multiple groups within the city, 'who were able to "see themselves" in the structure' (McDowell and Croke, 2019: 13).

It therefore provided a safe public space that was not aligned to any specific community, for the people of the city to commemorate. The result 'appeared to supersede and transform ethno-national and religious boundaries for a time' (McDowell and Croke, 2019: 14). Participants came to leave messages and artefacts within the structure, containing memories and experiences, knowing that these would ultimately be destroyed, once the installation was set on fire.

The symbolism of limited temporality, recovery and healing all appeared to resonate with those who contributed:

'Unlike many physical memorial landscapes in public spaces across our towns and cities, which are subject to competing interpretations and multiple meanings, the narratives embedded in this fleeting structure could not be challenged, resisted, celebrated or manipulated over time...The end of the Temple's physicality could offer new beginnings'
(McDowell and Croke, 2019: 13).

Questions for future study

This section has showcased the reason for optimism when it comes to 'difficult histories', by evidencing a novel way of encountering the past in the present. Nevertheless, the concept remains a subject of disagreement and debate, both in the UK and beyond. As legacies of the past evolve, history continues to manifest and be challenged within the public domain in unforeseen ways.

The following questions outline issues about how 'difficult histories' are, and might be, implemented in practice:

- Is it possible for popular culture to engender complex histories, whilst fostering shared positive identity narratives?
- Does the very act of remembering – and conversely, never forgetting – conflicted pasts, through institutionalised frameworks and narratives, allow for social peace to be achieved?
- What are the fundamental differences and processes involved with learning from the past and moving on from it?
- What can be learned from peace and reconciliation efforts achieved in other international settings marked by historical tensions and strife?
- How can success be measured in the context of 'difficult histories'?



2.

**Rethinking
identity and
'difficult histories'**

7

Introduction

In a global culture, where people and nations turn to history to understand and shape their world, governments and organisations are increasingly confronting burdens of the past from revisionist standpoints. Adopting a language of contrition and remorse helps both to evidence recognition and to remedy past wrongdoing. In other cases, arguments for reparations and restitution are advocated.

Momentum for these approaches to the past results, in part, from political and activist movements seeking to fight racism and injustice. Many UK higher education institutions are establishing 'decolonisation' initiatives, on the back of campaigning by students and academics highlighting experiences of oppression. For example, University College London's ongoing 'DecoloniseUCL' campaign builds on the previous initiatives 'Why isn't my Professor Black?' and 'Why is my Curriculum White?'

As pressure for change is applied, others dispute their sense of (national) identity and challenge their understanding of the past. In August 2017, the journalist and broadcaster Afua Hirsch's call in *The Guardian* to remove Nelson's Column from Trafalgar Square, London, provoked a fierce backlash. Critics denounced supposed cultural vandalism and the idea of superimposing modern values on the past. Moreover, the dominant response within mainstream media portrayed an iconoclast attack that could undermine British national identity.

Efforts to deliver more inclusive histories, in order to create shared identities, constitute a major challenge for countries. As historian Bain Attwood has noted:

'[Difficult histories] are contrary to the way nations have long regarded themselves. Yet nation states must be able to produce stories about themselves that can persuade their members that they are morally good and thus worthy of their love and loyalty'

Attwood, 2019: 99).

25. For scholars such as Priyamvada Gopal (Reader in Anglophone and Related Literature at the University of Cambridge), colonial history 'provides [the] context for many contemporary British concerns, from identity, multiculturalism and humanitarianism, to foreign aid, hard borders and sovereignty' (Gopal, 2019).

This complex yet paramount relationship between nationality, identity, and history has major implications for Britain, whose colonial past continues to shape experiences of community and neighbourhood.²⁵ However, public debates concerning the former British Empire are often reduced to a moral binary of 'good' and 'bad', where subjective, arbitrary categories of 'good' and 'bad' are inadequate, notwithstanding a hindrance to more complex engagement with the past (see Wagner, 2019). Although a postcolonial and (more) multicultural setting has prompted debates about Britain's imperial legacies, all too often individuals resort to using history as a comfort blanket – one that portrays the past in simple, uncritical, and usually mythical terms.

History produces and shapes meaningful contemporary identities and feelings of belonging. 'Remembering' is integral to the making of who we are, by producing a sense of social membership. Individuals and communities continuously seek reassurance from the past. However, by shaping contemporary attitudes, the past has the power to harm as well as to heal. For some, history provides a way of maintaining or conserving their sense of self; others draw upon the past as a means of determining who they are – exploring layers of identity, and recognising this as neither fixed nor stable.

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The choice to frame histories as 'difficult' is crucial to this process. A problem lies in terminology – the term 'difficult history' creates a value-based binary, distinguishing some history as 'difficult' and therefore other aspects as 'not difficult'. But History itself exists as a body of knowledge subject to re-interpretation and revaluation. 'Difficult histories' invoke historians to question openly what we know and understand about the past, to acknowledge challenges to this; most would deem all pasts as 'difficult', in one way or another.

As a concept, ‘difficult history’ raises a further issue around the responsibilities of who should be nurturing positive identities (nationally or locally), or whether reconciliation should fall within its remit. Some contend that moral expectations to forgive cannot form part of the historian’s work, on grounds of striving for objectivity and analytical rigour – instead positioning this responsibility under the distinctive category of commemoration (with its political aspirations). Others, such as the historian Anne Dolan, have outlined that historical practice risks uncovering divides or hatred within archives, and in failing to offer resolution, perpetuates division (Dolan, 2013).²⁶

One key method to address this issue lies in ensuring a representative make-up of staff within academia, schools, museums, and other areas in the public sphere where history manifests. Reports produced in 2018 by the Royal Historical Society urge the need to diversify the discipline, based on evidence of racial and ethnic inequalities in teaching and practice (Royal Historical Society, 2018a and 2018b). They reveal that History is the fifth-least diverse undergraduate subject: 96.1 per cent (%) of practising university historians identified as ‘white’ (a higher figure than most other subjects), whilst less than 1% identified as ‘black’.

26. Currently, Associate Professor in Modern Irish History, Trinity College Dublin.

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Given the diversity of the UK population, and the necessity for ‘difficult histories’ to speak across communities, human resourcing within the field of History remains in need of attention. Organisations must respond by doing more to secure new opportunities and to encourage applications from black and minority ethnic (BAME) candidates.

8

Key themes

At the February 2019 Cumberland Lodge conference, ‘Difficult Histories & Positive Identities’, roundtable discussions and guest presentations revolved around four main themes, each unpacking challenges that are pertinent for responding to ‘difficult histories’, and explored recommendations for future practice.

The key themes of were: discomfort; teaching within schools; The Holocaust as ‘difficult history’ and managing the recent past within Germany; and museums and peace-building.

Discomfort

Those dealing directly with ‘difficult histories’ must be comfortable with feeling uncomfortable. Often, the subject matter is inherently problematic, by virtue of falling outside established popular narratives. Rather than being a barrier, however, a position of disagreement or ‘discomfort’ should act as a fruitful aid for initiating dialogue. Incorporating counter-narratives, or inviting deliberate provocation, are ways of broadening horizons to question the meaning of the past. Developing understanding is a precursor for a more responsible and shared historical practice – facilitating a more informed, thorough, and inclusive history that better reflects our contemporary, diverse society.

Recognising that our view of the past is both selected and selective, those working to present ‘difficult histories’ might instead identify their daily practice as telling the same history differently. Acknowledging complexity or disharmony – rather than telling the past in simplistic ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ binaries – makes ‘difficult histories’ a positive mechanism for thinking. Broaching marginalised narratives can provide space for telling lesser-known stories, thereby renegotiating modern-day assumptions about who we think we are.

Case study: Edward Colston & Bristol

Examples of 'discomfort' within contested public space and architecture, such as the case of the 17th-Century slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol, illustrate the dilemmas of citizen interaction with a difficult past. Bristol's wealth stemmed in part from the involvement of its political and business elites in the slave trade. Colston bequeathed his legacy to charities around the city, making his name a prominent point of encounter across its streets and squares. Campaigners have sought to prompt a local public conversation 'as an important step towards a more frank and open discussion of slavery, imperialism and their legacies' (Donington et al., 2017). Many within the city are protective about what they understand to be 'their' local history. Particularly via online comment forums, diverse fears emerged – concerns about a rewriting of the past, and a perceived attack upon Bristolian identity.²⁷ Interacting with a sense of shame also remains problematic for organisations and institutions, which are reluctant to engage in controversy for risk of reputation and financial implication.

Such episodes illustrate the recurring debate about the ways in which Britain should confront its colonial past (see Gilroy, 2005; Younge, 2018). In April 2017, the Colston Hall in Bristol announced that it would remove its named association with Edward Colston. This was on the back of a petition that attracted over 2,000 signatures from members of the public and anti-racism campaigners. Furthermore, in October 2018, a Member of Parliament for Bristol called for the removal of the city's statue of Colston, and on Anti-Slavery Day an art installation of figurines representing slaves was placed in front of it (BBC, 2018b; Evans, 2018; Booth, 2018).²⁸

This debate continues to play out through macro discussions about renaming or removing Colston's legacy from buildings, artistic interventions and the political spectrum. Historians have added further weight to these local reform conversations. Historian, Cheryl Hudson, argues that looking to reduce Colston's ubiquity in the city is indicative of either narcissism or an attempt to commodify the past:

27. Whilst acknowledging that removal or change does not always constitute erasure, 'erasure' was identified as a loaded term. However, policies of deliberate 'erasure' or unintentional 'forgetting' both legitimately exist as either a deliberate strategy of avoidance, or an attempt at rebuilding society.

28. Bristol City Council planned to install an additional plaque explaining Colston's role in the slave trade, but this was reportedly delayed in March 2019, due to a row over its wording.

29. <https://history.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2017/09/08/grad-students-faculty-and-alum-give-free-history-lessons-at-confederate-monument/> (8 September 2017).

'To whitewash our cities or adjust our collective memory to suit current tastes and predilections flattens out history and memory; it is a sinister undertaking. It is one thing to undertake a project of forgetting if you are moving on to do something else but to shape an urban environment into an inoffensive prophylactic only turns diverse and interesting cities into bland, beige, dull and faceless entities' (Donington et al., 2017; see also Hudson, 2016).

The Colston controversy shows how the issue of culpability, as a means of reconciling with the past in the present, remains a live and fractious topic. Addressing 'difficult histories' categorises aspects of the past to which we allocate attention – in other words, a moral issue of 'silence or salience'. But instigating change can destabilise uncontextualised, untroubled histories and break existing silences.

Groups such as 'Historians for a Better Future' (consisting of graduate students, alumni and professors from North Carolina State University) in the US inspire passing visitors to learn more about the historical context and legacies of Confederate Civil War monuments.²⁹ Their activities account for the on-site impact that these statues have in the present, in terms of identity and civic culture. Confronting opposition may form part of their dealings, but with a broader ambition of enlightening perspectives.

Teaching within schools

The importance of history is predominantly framed by teachers (and other advocates) as a matter of educational importance: good history education helps to produce responsible citizens. Historical training involves searching for, and sifting through, evidence as a key skill, but also learning to develop historical perspective from competing accounts. Focus group research conducted by the Royal Historical Society revealed a strong pupil appetite for the subject; despite limited contact time, young minds were enthused by the opportunity to understand the past's complexity (Royal Historical Society, 2018a.)

30. The explicit auspices of the National Curriculum mandate that teachers cover culturally and geographically diverse history, within an open framework that operates until the end of Year 9 (pupils aged 14)

Teachers and teacher organisations have published significant work over recent decades, not only theorising classroom practice, but also outlining history's constituent interplay between overview and depth (e.g. Davies, 2017). Successive iterations of the National Curriculum have enhanced the subject's focus beyond 'method' onto processes of interpretation, argument, and use of evidence. Significantly though, the National Curriculum is not binding; only around 50% of primary schools remain bound by it, whilst academies are exempted.³⁰ Broader concern detailed that many pupils struggled to argue and analyse effectively at GCSE level, due to a limited Key Stage 3 curriculum diet. Noble teacher intentions are often overwhelmed by administrative, league-table and exam pressures. Some educators advocate a connection with schools adopting a managerialist culture and exam board business models – pressuring history teachers to practise GCSE skills methods, and to pursue reductive, source-based exercises at a cost of rich content.

In July 2019, the Runnymede Trust (in partnership with the TIDE project at the University of Liverpool) called on the UK government to make teaching the interlinked histories of empire and migration compulsory in secondary school. Noting that only 4% of pupils taking GCSE history choose the optional 'Migration to Britain' module, the report outlined that, in spite of these topics already featuring within the rubric of History and English curricula, many schools were hampered by limited textbook resources.

A willingness to teach 'difficult histories' engenders a range of logistical and conceptual challenges, not least a weight of expectation on teachers to make topics interactive, relevant, and engaging.

Steps for change thus include:

- Revising the focus of the secondary school History curriculum to cover broader subjects. Studying fewer topics in detail can enrich students and teachers alike, through aiding processual understanding, whilst refining pupil appreciation and practice

31. The European Association of History Educators (EUROCLIO) initiative seeks to pursue responsible and innovative history, citizenship and heritage education through critical enquiry, multi-perspectivity, mutual respect and the inclusion of controversial issues. Its Erasmus+ project 'Learning to Disagree', offers four free-to-download resource case studies, which focus on 'People on the Move', 'Annexation and Separation', 'Surviving Under Pressure' and 'Cultural Heritage' respectively.

32. This works with local heritage services to develop classroom resources and free-to-download teaching packs. Since 2012, the...

of historical argument. The practice of combining the study of individual experience with multiple perspectivity retains a toolkit for developing skills of critical thinking, questioning, and analysis.

- 'Decolonising' the curriculum, to render it more inclusive. Addressing imperial subjects such as the Partition of India or the Bengal Famine may rectify a relative lack of ethnic coverage within the discipline. Greater crossover with additional core subjects, by advancing existing departmental collaborations between English Literature and History, around specific cross-curricular themes, is also desirable (for instance, the 1905 feminist utopian novel *The Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain or Sebastian Barry's 2005 novel *A Long, Long Way*, on Ireland during the First World War).
- Warranting curricular attention to a local sense of place. The familiarity, affinity, and immediacy of corresponding subject matter (coupled with local sites and stories of people representative of those involved in historical events) would enable students to interrogate broader stories at a national level. This might mean introducing young children to history not via chronology, but rather by focusing on concrete and feasible community histories.
- Providing better training/support facilities for teacher continuing professional development (prioritising history-specific CPD, rather than more generic or exam-based CPD), alongside meeting the demand for historical education training that enables individual teachers to deal with difficult topics effectively and sensitively (e.g. new resources/methodologies for working with a diverse student body and dealing constructively with disagreement).³¹
- Building on successful models for delivering engaging, innovative content on specific topics – developing initiatives such as the Historical Association's National Teaching Fellowship scheme, Historic England's Heritage Schools Programme (funded by the Department for Education) and teacher experience showcased at the annual 'Schools History Project' Conference.³²

(cont.) initiative has supported over 600 schools, and 500,000 school children, UK-wide, alongside training for 3,000 teachers (Historic England, 2018). See: www.schools.historyproject.co.uk/about-shp/

- Allocating financial support to enable input from contributors, such as university lecturers, museum curators or community workers, or cross-disciplinary creative interactions with local artists. External support for face-to-face programmes and accessible online resources highlighted the benefit of outsider help.

These suggestions link to funding concerns. The dearth of political will and a lack of support for classroom resources risks generating both a ‘stick to what you know’ culture amongst time-pressed teachers, and a ‘force-fed’ approach to knowledge, exerting emphasis on student recital of learned information within exam settings. Hence, the call that history should not only retain its knowledge-enabling function, but also foster a sense of shared citizenship, through a binding national narrative recognising that ‘our shared story has become richer and more diverse. It is readier to engage with victims as well as victors’ (Stannard, 2019).

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Changing classroom demographics see BAME young people constituting 27% of state-funded primary and secondary school pupils across England and Wales (Weale, 2019). It is fundamental that historical education should deliver a more integrated, fuller understanding of British identity, its origins and contestations. Developing critical-thinking toolkits, in tandem with the broader consensus for a more diverse history curriculum, would foster healthier reflection about the under-addressed elements of this national story.

Teaching ‘difficult histories’ may actively contribute towards a more debate-orientated society: one that allows individuals to

see themselves within the histories they are taught. Social media shape how young people consume information and respond to issues. Recent youth-led climate change protests illustrate the willingness of young people to demand political change. Drawing connections between past and current events can enhance understanding: for example, rethinking the Industrial Revolution as the onset of an ecological crisis, or global warming through the lens of industrialisation. Via digital technology, upcoming generations can broadcast their views on ‘difficult histories’ and shape (virtual) debates around how we portray identity, drawing upon the past to deal with present challenges.

Teaching ‘difficult histories’ may actively contribute towards a more debate-orientated society: one that allows individuals to see themselves within the histories they are taught.

The Holocaust as ‘difficult history’ and managing the recent past within Germany

The Holocaust has featured on the National Curriculum History syllabus since 1991. Whilst studied and taught for decades in the UK, there has been a renewed interest in recent years with the inevitable passing of eye-witnesses, and gradual transition from living memory into history. The disappearance of first-hand survivor testimony coincides with a misunderstanding of the Holocaust and growing anti-Semitism within the UK (Sherwood, 2019; ‘Panel Discussion: Public Memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust’, YouTube, 2019). There are also concerns that the UK Holocaust Memorial, due to be installed in Westminster, risks disseminating a redemptive narrative around how Britain chooses to remember its involvement with the Holocaust (Moore (Bob), 2019; Moore (Rowan), 2019).

Contemporary rhetoric to the Second World War, as a time when Britain ‘stood alone’, simultaneously conveys a powerful narrative of Britain as facing an ‘outsider’ who threatens values. Such an understanding fosters a strong national sentiment

and sense of belonging for some, or conveys a response to contemporary uncertainty that perpetuates distrust, discrimination, and disillusionment for others (Walker, 2019; Montlake, 2019).

Prioritising which areas of history are given prominence within debates and discourse questions whether a strong focus on the Holocaust inadvertently displaces other 'difficult' episodes in *British* history. One view that appears to have gained traction, though not universal support, is of a need for more open debate about whether the Holocaust has become a somewhat 'safe' topic to address under the remit of 'difficult histories'.

Opponents contend this argument of familiarity and supposed acceptance, calling instead for educational interventions that respond to the challenges and constraints of this new landscape – for example, having to conceptualise and tackle the subject matter in only one or two hours of actual school-based teaching.³³ However, encountering this knowledge provides powerful insight into one's own sense of belonging, and encompasses a responsibility to challenge the present through individual action – a priority that represents the best memorial for the future.

UK practitioners and influencers might look to draw upon the case study of Germany, in the ways that it is confronting and repenting for its own difficult past. Not only has post-war migration provided a more diverse public, but Germany has also championed the facilitation of forums for internal debate – for example, the 1986–89 *Historikerstreit* scholarly debate that centred on determining the singularity of the Holocaust. Dedicated efforts, in the form of historical research and critical history education, have been channelled in Germany as tools of remembrance for overcoming past legacies.

Nonetheless, there is a lack of agreement when dealing with the memories of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Within Germany's Eastern regions, some groups and advocates resist attempts to critically historicise the socialist regime as well as the Nazi past. The result is a curtailment of inter-generational

33. Beyond considerations such as individual class size, consensus around the most appropriate age at which young people should encounter distressing subject matter remains unclear.

dialogue, internalised guilt, and growing uncertainty about how future generations might interact with historical legacies.

Populist parties and groups in Germany illustrate a need for developing commemorative concepts for different historical periods. Interestingly, this debate has coincided with the awarding of €93 million in May 2019 for the restoration of the Nuremberg Nazi Party Rally Grounds. The change from an architectural stage to an archaeological embarrassment has now brought a degree of closure to a longstanding headache of site preservation, conservation, or destruction. The decision to opt for restoration signals an approach of proactively confronting and managing this component of Germany's past as a pathway to moral recovery.

Museums and peace-building

By utilising material evidence and participatory learning to engage their audiences, museums influence our sense of collective belonging. Many address power structures (and imbalances); they stimulate new perspectives, promote dialogue and forge new alliances through partnerships (such as external commissions). But museums also remain divisive. Some criticise museums for reinforcing exclusions that fail to engage audiences beyond certain affinity groups, or for a perceived lack of moral accountability, when it comes to the cultural restitution of objects within their collections.

Whilst some museums represent outlets for mainstream (national) history, an increasing trend of depicting or representing the experience of oppression and perceived injustice amongst particular communities is creating dedicated 'difficult history' museum spaces.³⁴ Paramilitary museums in Belfast, for example, highlight a growing interest amongst certain tourist groups to treat these sites as seminal outlets of Northern Ireland's past, despite a lack of state support or involvement from the formal museum sector.

34. Richard Sandell and Robert Janes attest that museum organisations are progressively engaging in activist practice, in response to inequalities and current crises (Janes and Sandell, 2019).

35.
A person who stands up for something, as contrasted to a bystander who remains inactive.
<http://www.upstand.org/>

Exploring conflicting histories remains problematic in a sectarian society, where enduring memories of pain make the divided past a lived present. Public debate is fixated on this binary of perpetrator and victimhood, but there are also calls for a new vocabulary to think beyond this terminology – for instance, by asking who the upstanders³⁵ and the bystanders were. Within Northern Ireland, reconciliation programmes have pursued tolerance and dialogue schemes, including amongst former prisoners with differing backgrounds and beliefs. Though these efforts are yet to be prioritised above political power-sharing, they symbolise an aspiration to move from violent conflict towards shared existence.

As shown with the Section Six case study, using arts to encourage civic participation and social cohesion can be a successful method for transitioning to post-conflict peace-building. Another example would be the 1986 Monument against Fascism in Hamburg, a 12-metre-tall lead column that allowed everyday inscription from those passing by, whilst it gradually sank into the ground to the point of eventual disappearance. Reckoning with the past in this manner not only provides space for communicating grievances, but renders ‘difficult history’ more banal and thus approachable. In a devolved political landscape, the past can act as a bridge across fractious community divides, with counter-memorials as sites for healing and resolution.

36.
<https://muse-umdetox.wordpress.com/>;
<https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/communities/>

Similarly, within museums, other breakaway forms of interpretation are implemented. In London, a new ‘Queer Britain’ museum illustrates how previously suppressed aspects of our national past emerge and achieve recognition. Small-scale networks, such as ‘Museums Detox’ and the ‘Black African Heritage Programme’ at the Victoria & Albert Museum (supported by volunteer guides), are modifying the ways in which visitors and museum professionals interact with collections.³⁶ The potential for cross-sector collaborations opens up museum spaces for new, progressive stories – an important step for mediating institutional change and inspiring new audiences.

9

Recommendations

Embracing ‘difficult histories’ requires a sustained commitment on the part of governments, educators, and learners to promote meaningful change, in order to prompt greater engagement and to shift existing perspectives amongst the wider public. Identifying the wrongs of the past – and taking responsibility for making the consequences of wrongful actions right – is a positive step towards righting social injustices in the present.

Who are we trying to engage with ‘difficult histories’?

‘Difficult histories’ reflect societal and cultural concerns. They can impact on society as a whole alongside specific sub-groups. Members of minority groups may feel disillusioned about affiliating with majority narratives that are at odds with their own experiences. Initiatives to think through the past that include marginalised voices, and bring together people from different backgrounds, can help individuals to reconnect with their communities.

Constructive engagement with contentious subject matter, via public cultural initiatives, means dealing overtly with audience diversity. Measures that speak to empowering communities can be achieved.

Our recommendations are:

- Create ‘safe spaces’ for conversational exchange about ‘difficult histories’, which emphasise a need for accepting difference and cross-sector co-operation (e.g. between NGOs and public sector organisations). Successful collaboration will rely on clear objectives, such as obtaining constructive feedback on ideas without fear of repercussion.
- Prioritise institutional completion of stakeholder analysis frameworks, as a practical demographic measure to consider the needs of groups impacted by future interventions. This step

may precede the creation of a Community Advisory Board, whose collective representation and consultation feeds into decision-making processes for public-facing organisations.

- Make practice-based findings and (e-learning) toolkits available for broader circulation (e.g. via an online resource library) to remote organisations that would benefit from access.
- Co-ordinate social media campaigns that connect online conversations, to inspire individuals in their daily practice and to facilitate connections across societal boundaries.

Which ‘difficult histories’?

It is paramount to connect ‘difficult histories’ with investigative rigour, at a time when historians’ expertise is threatened by misinformation on social media. The internationally recognised Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation is pioneering multi-partner framework initiatives to guide diplomatic responses to contested historical issues.³⁷

37. <https://www.ihjr.org/ethics-and-legacy/>; and <https://www.osce.org/hcnm/415121?download=true> (‘Contested Historical Legacies in Public Spaces’, speech given at the University of Oxford by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner on National Minorities, March 2019).

- But as groups engage with legacies of the past in divergent ways, there is a pressing need to better understand the impact of choosing histories. Making a choice to commemorate marks an event out from the everyday. However, promoting educative remembrance of one past over another can prove damaging and divisive, when communities attempt to distinguish themselves through competitive narratives of victimhood. Defining oneself as a victim entails claims of exceptionalism, by valorising certain kinds of experiences. Victimhood can detach responsibility for present action; some see reparative measures as reinforcing power relations between victim and historical victor, and ‘more likely to divide than reconcile’ (Jenkins, 2018b: 285). What is more, ‘difficult histories’ do not (necessarily) morph into ‘easy histories’ – resolution is a continuous process of different stakeholders.

Our recommendations are:

- Improve co-ordination between currently independent ‘difficult histories’ initiatives across organisations.
- Create a potential platform that maps out joined-up thinking and common values across case studies (e.g. by pooling output reports into a national repository).
- Mine more actively practice from comparable international initiatives that focus on challenging pasts (recent or otherwise).

How can we address Britain’s cultural amnesia?

Many efforts to address Britain’s colonial past become the subject of high-profile media coverage and popular commentary. Though this past retains tangible connections to prejudice, structural racism, and negative patriotism, critiques are frequently intertwined with discussions around political correctness and multiculturalism, or dismissed as sanctimonious self-flagellation within some outlets (see Donington et al., 2017).

Yet many organisations with chequered pasts are progressively opting to face up to involvement in historical wrongs.³⁸ Prompted by a desire to open up debate from the inside, institutions are dedicating resources to both raising awareness and delivering impactful research on decolonisation. Questions remain about the extent to which these moves are purely window-dressing, or whether they constitute a worthwhile moral imperative – as a symbolic gesture of making amends or a potential precursor to a broad programme of reparations.³⁹

The following measures seek to build on these issues and developments, emphasising the establishment of a sense of identity, founded on tolerant historical narratives and remembrance frameworks, which can speak to a range of communities. These recommendations permit a sustained reappraisal and informed re-acknowledgement of Britain’s own ‘difficult histories’, melding complex pasts together to convey

38. The University of Cambridge is establishing a two-year archival initiative to investigate its historical links with slavery (Coughlan, 2019), whilst the University of Glasgow is launching a reparative justice programme, having benefited financially from slave trade profits.

39. For commentary on the impacts of higher education decolonisation initiatives, see Olusoga, 2019.

a more positive, enlightened, and realistic sense of national identity.

Our recommendations are:

- Utilise History as a dynamic discipline, capable of eliciting diverse perspectives, and of determining truth, to inform thinkers to make intelligent public-facing decisions.
- Invest in effective, high-profile (public-facing) platforms that permit 'deep-dive' exploration into difficult pasts, in the vein of higher education 'decolonisation' initiatives (as opposed to performative memorial responses or public apologies). Platforms must encourage buy-in, as a precursor for inspiring future acts of compassion and for strengthening positive social cohesion amongst their users.
- Encourage inclusive scholarly practices and programmes, alongside participatory learning spaces, in which teachers are invested, and where young people are prompted to ask questions about their personal identities.
- Support innovative approaches for confronting 'difficult histories' with young people, such as 'Games for Change', which motivates youth gamers to explore civic issues by combining game technology with historical subject matter.⁴⁰
- Invest in 'beyond the classroom' education programmes that embed partnerships between museums and local schools, thereby fostering deeper learner engagement, empathy and creative practice (e.g. the Key Stage 3–4 Resource Bank and the 'Schools History Project' initiative, hosted by the Migration Museum in London; and the international 'Transformative History Education' project).⁴¹
- Engage with uncomfortable truths across generations, through novel methodologies that provide accessible history (e.g. inter-generational oral/family histories for school projects on emigration and immigration; variants on social justice programmes to prompt reconciliation; and biographical community histories).

40. www.games-forchange.org/

41. <https://transformativehistoryeducation.wordpress.com/>

Contributors

The following is a list of the people who have contributed to the development of this report by participating in the conference and consultation discussions that we convened at Cumberland Lodge in the 12 months leading up to publication.

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Yasmeen Akhtar

Alexander Haus

Sarah Clowry

Durham University
(Cumberland Lodge Scholar)

Professor Ravinder Barn

Royal Holloway, University of
London

Dr Helen Connolly

Remembering Srebrenica

Professor Nigel Biggar

University of Oxford

Christine Counsell

Inspiration Trust

Dr Dea Birkett

Kids in Museums

Professor Santanu Das

University of Oxford

Professor Elleke Boehmer

University of Oxford

Professor Martin Daunton

University of Cambridge

Professor David Clark

University of Oxford

Christian Davies

The Guardian / The Observer

Dr Esme Cleall

University of Sheffield

Bob Deen

Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

Dr Rachel Clogg

Conciliation Resources

Matt Dickinson
Nuffield Department of Medicine,
University of Oxford
(Cumberland Lodge Scholar)

Dr Jo-Anne Dillabough
University of Cambridge

Dr Alison Eardley
University of Westminster

Hannah Elias
Institute of Historical Research

Professor Margot Finn
Royal Historical Society;
University College London

Dr Sinéad Fitzsimons
European Association of History
Educators (EUROCLIO)

Dr Alix Green
University of Essex

Professor Neil Gregor
University of Southampton

Professor Sandra Halperin
Royal Holloway, University of
London

Dr Bryn Hammond
Imperial War Museum

Ishrat Hossain
University of Oxford
(Cumberland Lodge Scholar)

Tom Jackson
Holocaust Education Trust

Dr Tiffany Jenkins
Freelance writer, broadcaster,
author

Dr Etienne Joseph
Hackney Archives

Robyn Kasozi
Migration Museum

Amina Khazhmetova
Dipse.net

Catrina Kirkland
Holocaust Education Trust

Rabiyah K Latif
Near Neighbours

Dr Bryce Lease
Royal Holloway, University of
London

Dr Susan Leedham
University of Exeter

Dr Serena Lervolino
King's College London

Dr Roland Löffler
Regional Agency for Civic
Education, Saxony, Germany

Dr Emma Login
Historic England; First World War
Memorials

Keith Lowe
Author and historian

Dr Katie Markham
Newcastle University

Beki Martin
Facing History and Ourselves

Rachael Minott
Birmingham Museum

Dr Andy Mycock
University of Huddersfield

Nkechi Noel
Victoria & Albert Museum

Rosemary Nuamah Williams
Lambeth Palace, Church of
England

Kristin O'Donnell
University of Brighton
(Cumberland Lodge Scholar)

Patricia O'Lynn
Queen's University Belfast
(Cumberland Lodge Scholar)

Jack Parsons
University of Oxford
(Cumberland Lodge Scholar)

Dr Michelle Perkins
Facing History and Ourselves

Kemal Pervanić
Most Mira

Sean Pettis
Corrymeela Community,
Northern Ireland

Amber Pierce
Royal Holloway, University of
London
(Amy Buller PhD Scholar,
Cumberland Lodge)

John Pool
Honorary Life Fellow and former
trustee, Cumberland Lodge

Lucinda Porten
National Trust

Lisa Power MBE
Queer Britain

**The Rt Hon the Baroness
Prashar of Runnymede CBE**
Chair of Trustees, Cumberland
Lodge

Alice Purkiss
University of Oxford

Dr Rahul Rao

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (SOAS)

Marie-Louise Ryback

Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR)

Nic Schlagman

West London Synagogue of British Jews (WLS)

Katarina Schwarz

University of Nottingham

Sandra Shakespeare

Museum Detox

Joe Simpson

Leadership Centre

Dr Matthew Smith

Royal Holloway, University of London

Ghiyas Somra

Brap

Sandra Stancliffe

Historic England

Alicia Stevens

University of Cambridge

Hans Svennevig

Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)

Maria Vasquez-Aguilar

University of Sheffield

Dr Diana Walters

Cultural Heritage without Borders

Dr Hannah Young

Victoria & Albert Museum

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Cumberland Lodge
The Great Park
Windsor
Berkshire SL4 2HP
cumberlandlodge.ac.uk
enquiries@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk
01784 432316
    @cumberlandlodge

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