

## Historical Geography at Large

## How to talk about British colonialism in the middle of a culture war

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## ABSTRACT

In this 'Historical Geography at Large' review I recount my participation in an August 2023 summer school led by Professor Alan Lester at the University of Sussex, entitled 'How to talk about British colonialism in the middle of a culture war'. The workshop encouraged the participation of non-academics who desired greater knowledge of the British empire and its legacies, to help them negotiate contemporary debates over race, slavery, colonialism, and national identity. I recount the two days of lectures and debate led by Lester, as well as a day-long walking tour of London, where we discussed contentious statues and the even more contentious interior of the government's Commonwealth, Foreign and Development Office building. These generative encounters present an activist and participatory form of historical geography at large.

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In 2010 the *Journal of Historical Geography* launched its 'Historical Geography at Large' section. The aim was to create a space for '... reviews of what some might call public historical geography — after the model of public history — as reflected for example in the work of historical geographers for exhibitions and installations, magazines and newspapers, film and television, and of course the digital and electronic media papers.'<sup>1</sup> Half of the submitted papers to date as part of this initiative have focussed on exhibitions, one of the main ways in which historical geographers communicate their

research beyond academia, and one of the most accessible spaces in which to appraise and share broader works which may be of interest to our readers.<sup>2</sup> Papers have also addressed websites, reports, and events.<sup>3</sup> But this section has also included surveys of public and participatory historical geographies that hint at the broader ways that historical geographers have engaged non-academics, including participatory, co-produced, or community-based research.<sup>4</sup> A less pursued route to historical geography at large is activist geography.

One of the intellectual terrains for activist work by academics more broadly has been the supposed culture wars that have raged since the 1990s in the USA and have since become a more global phenomenon. Emerging from initial resistance to the perceived growing popularity of secularism, the civil rights movement and identity politics, the culture wars now reify supposedly implacable conservative and liberal tribes. Populist political campaigns now

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<sup>1</sup> Felix Driver, 'Historical geography at large', *Journal of Historical Geography* 36 (2010) p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Baigent, 'Revealing the city in maps: Bath seen, built, and imagined', *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 385–389; Stephen Daniels, 'Hockney Country', *Journal of Historical Geography* 38 (2012) 458–464; Amy E Cutler, 'A local habitation and a name': Writing Britain', *Journal of Historical Geography* 39 (2013) 125–134; Charles WJ Withers, 'The longitude question', *Journal of Historical Geography* 47 (2015) 1–5; Claudia Soares, 'Care and trauma: Exhibiting histories of philanthropic childcare practices', *Journal of Historical Geography* 52 (2016) 100–107; Elizabeth Haines, 'Mapping out history: A cartographic view of the twentieth century', *Journal of Historical Geography* 55 (2017) 60–68; Melissa Bennett and Kristy Warren, 'Looking back and facing forwards: ten years of the London, Sugar & Slavery gallery', *Journal of Historical Geography* 63 (2019) 94–99; Katherine Parker, 'Coming to terms with Captain Cook: exhibiting the 250th anniversary of the Endeavour voyage', *Journal of Historical Geography* 64 (2019) 98–103.

<sup>3</sup> Felix Driver, 'Research in historical geography and in the history and philosophy of geography in the UK, 2001–2011: An overview', *Journal of Historical Geography* 42 (2013) 203–211; Jerry Brotton, 'Maps online: digital historical geographies', *Journal of Historical Geography* 43 (2014) 169–174; Lara Choksey, 'Colston falling', *Journal of Historical Geography* 74 (2021) 77–83.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Driver, 'Historical geography at large: towards public historical geographies', *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014) 92; Caroline Bressey, 'Archival interventions: Participatory research and public historical geographies', *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014) 102–104; Dydia Delyser, 'Towards a participatory historical geography: Archival interventions, volunteer service, and public outreach in research on early women pilots', *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014) 93–98; Hilary Geoghegan, 'A new pattern for historical geography: working with enthusiast communities and public history', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 46 (2014) 105–107; Laura J Cameron, 'Participation, archival activism and learning to learn', *Journal of Historical Geography* 46 (2014), 99–101; 1 Briony McDonagh, Edward Brookes, Kate Smith, Hannah Worthen, Tom J Coulthard, Gill Hughes, Stewart Mottram, Amy Skinner, and Jack Chamberlain, 'Learning Histories, Participatory Methods and Creative Engagement for Climate Resilience', *Journal of Historical Geography* 82 (2023) 91–97.

rage against allegedly woke multiculturalism, cultural Marxism and nefarious liberal, global elites.<sup>5</sup> In part-reaction to the increasingly racial and imperial nostalgic tone of some public and government discourse in the UK, a series of popular history books have sought to inform and re-direct discussion of Britain's imperial past.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022 Alan Lester, Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Sussex, published *Deny and Disavow: Distancing the Imperial Past in the Culture Wars*.<sup>7</sup> Priced at £7.99, the book aimed to inform readers of the basic facts of British imperial history and to review the sites in which this history is made manifest, and thus contestable, in contemporary Britain. Building on this work, in August 2023 Lester ran a three-day summer school at the University of Sussex entitled 'How to talk about British colonialism in the middle of a culture war'. The advertisement for the first workshop, subsidised to limit the cost to £100 per participant, opened as follows:

Since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the ensuing backlash, it has become ever riskier to talk about British colonialism. Whatever you say, accusations might fly that you are either “woke” or reactionary. The empire has become a battleground in the culture war. If you are a teacher, heritage professional, civil servant, journalist or someone who is just interested in finding out more and talking with greater confidence about British colonialism, this summer school is for you.<sup>8</sup>

The thirteen attendees secured their places on a first come, first served basis and divided almost evenly into those located within or beyond the university sector, though with several attendees blurring the line. The seven attendees primarily based at universities included a Master's degree student, a research fellow, two full-time academics, a librarian and researcher, and two doctoral candidates, one of whom had been a history teacher. Of the six attendees beyond academia, one conducted research and led history walking tours in London, another was an arts producer and heritage advisor, while a third was a public history researcher and social media producer. The final three attendees included a youth worker, dancer, and community mentor; a sixth form teacher; and a human rights lawyer who worked with migrants to the UK.<sup>9</sup>

The opening day was a *tour de force* by Lester, who gave three accessible but comprehensive lectures on the history of the British empire, drawing upon 30 years' worth of research and teaching on the practices and legacies of imperialism. Though not explicit, there was an implicit historical geographical premise behind these overviews, consistent with the spatial logics which have informed

Lester's academic publications targeted at historians as well as geographers.<sup>10</sup> The three lectures made the case that there were different regions of imperial activity, but that they can only be understood through the imperial networks that facilitated and made them, and produced connections of causality between seemingly disparate geographies of empire. The opening lecture on the 'basics of the British empire' addressed the 'what about' approach to qualifying and justifying British imperialism (what about ancient empires, the Portuguese and Spanish precedents etc). Lester presented, instead, the connections between these former regimes and those of the British, whose imperial systems aped the Romans (less so the Greeks). They benefitted, directly and indirectly, from the wealth that Iberian colonialism funnelled into Europe, giving it material advantages over India and China which it would exploit to the fullest. The messy and brutal global story of Britain's imperial wars, victories, and losses in the eighteenth century were recapped before outlining the four pillars of the nineteenth-century empire (industrial economy, the city of London, India, and settler colonialism).

The following lecture countered popular triumphalist narratives regarding Britain's role in abolition by outlining the centrality of slavery to the establishment of British colonialism in the Atlantic world. Opting for the term slave trafficking, instead of trade, Lester outlined how Britain was the dominant trafficker of enslaved Africans between 1640 and 1807, during which time 3.1 million people were forcibly extracted from Africa, of whom only 2.7 million survived the middle passage. The complex geographical ramifications were made clear, from the depopulation and destabilisation of West African kingdoms, to the displacement and decimation of American First Nation communities, to the vast enrichment of Britons, through both slavery and the compensation payments that came with the abolition of slavery. Lester brilliantly showed that there were precedents for 'anti-woke' culture war tropes today who criticised anti-slavery campaigners, including Charles Dickens' criticism of 'telescopic philanthropy'.<sup>11</sup>

The third lecture similarly connected the establishment of British colonialism in the Indian Ocean world to global networks of tea, opium, cotton, sugar, and slavery. The abolition of slavery in 1833 (slavery within India was exempt) led the gaze of imperial financiers to switch to India, and for the proto-state of the East India Company to tax Indian land and products ever more. This formed part of the context for the uprising of 1857 and the homicidal violence that was used to put it down, laying the foundations for the much more explicitly hierarchised Raj era of direct government that followed.

The first day concluded with a pre-recorded interview between Lester and Professor Corinne Fowler, who had been Global Connections Fellow at the National Trust from September 2019 to June 2020. Her work laid the basis for the *Interim Report on the Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, Including Links with Historic Slavery*, issued in September 2020.<sup>12</sup> It found that roughly one third of National Trust houses had some connection to slavery and other forms of colonialism. While the initial reception was measured, a speech in the House of Commons by Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg provoked a concerted campaign against the report, and Fowler in particular, by MPs and the press (her phone was also hacked, the source of which remains unknown).<sup>13</sup> The Royal Historical Society came out

<sup>5</sup> Alan Lester, *Deny & Disavow: Distancing the Imperial Past in the Culture Wars* (London: SunRise, 2023), p. 26–31. Also see Huw C Davies and Sheena E MacRae, 'An anatomy of the British war on woke', *Race & Class* 65 (2023) 3–54.

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Kehinde Andrews, *The Psychosis of Whiteness: Surviving the Insanity of a Racist World* (London: Penguin, 2023); Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland: How Imperialism has Shaped Modern Britain* (London: Pantheon, 2023); Hannah Rose Woods, *Rule, Nostalgia: A Backwards History of Britain* (London: Random House, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> The second edition was published the following year.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/how-to-talk-about-british-colonialism-in-the-middle-of-a-culture-war-tickets-648158739237>, last accessed on 21 September 2023.

<sup>9</sup> The attendees have stayed touch since the summer school, sharing thoughts and resources on a WhatsApp group. We have discussed the various reports we have written about our time together and have agreed to the use of the photographs used below.

<sup>10</sup> In particular see Alan Lester, 'Imperial circuits and networks: geographies of the British Empire', *History Compass* 4 (2006) 124–141; Alan Lester, 'Spatial concepts and the historical geographies of British colonialism', in *Studies in Imperialism, 100th Edition*, ed. by A Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 118–142; Alan Lester, Kate Boehme, and Peter Mitchell, *Ruling the World: Freedom, Civilisation and Liberalism in the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> See Lester, *Deny & Disavow*, p. 170.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/addressing-our-histories-of-colonialism-and-historic-slavery>, last accessed 21 September 2023.

<sup>13</sup> For a commentary on the campaign see <https://lbsatucl.wordpress.com/2021/02/17/culture-wars-in-country-houses-what-the-national-trust-controversy-tells-us-about-british-history-today/>, last accessed 21 September 2023.



Fig. 1. Discussing the statue of Mary Seacole at St. Thomas's Hospital. (Photo author's own).

in support of the veracity of the report, but this did not prevent Fowler experiencing over a year of online abuse, including death threats and misogynistic slurs. Professor Fowler's inspirational message to those caught in the supposed culture wars was that engaging with online abusers often elicited surprisingly open responses from people who didn't really know the history they were venting about. Rather than debating the historical facts, the better approach was to ask what it was that offended people about the facts of empire?

We concluded the first day with a group discussion and reflection on what we had learned. Many of the comments returned to peoples' emotional reactions to the historical geographies of empire. These were reactions both to the sheer scale of empire, but also to the force of the details of minor lives and experiences. The psychology of empire and its legacies was a recurrent topic: where had the phenomenon of the threatened (white, male, middle class) majority emerged from and why? Without becoming despondent, how can we imagine how we can do better? To what extent is British history, in the words of historian David Olusoga, considered a 'soft play area', where people go to feel better about themselves, rather than challenged.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See [https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jun/19/british-history-should-not-be-treated-as-a-soft-play-area-says-david-olusoga?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2022/jun/19/british-history-should-not-be-treated-as-a-soft-play-area-says-david-olusoga?CMP=share_btn_link), last accessed 21 September 2023.

These conversations were continued between attendees during our walking tour of statues in London on day two, reenacting routes and histories outlined in *Deny and Disavow*. Lester provided mini-lectures at each site, focusing not on the aesthetic properties of the statues, but on the historical geography of their siting, the mobility of the historical subjects, and the context for the statues' construction. The statue of nurse and healer Mary Seacole (see Fig. 1), voted the Greatest Black Briton, now occupies a prominent site in the grounds of St Thomas's Hospital, staring across the Thames to Parliament and, behind that, the recently erected statues of Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. Unlike those political campaigners, Seacole worked for the betterment of the state and its soldiers. The statue was initially resisted, however, on the grounds that St. Thomas's Hospital had been where Florence Nightingale, the great rival for Britain's nursing affection, had worked.

The three statues of white imperial men that we discussed next served to underline Lester's broader point about the interconnectedness of the empire. Lester introduces Henry Bartle Frere (Fig. 2) in *Deny & Disavow* as follows: 'a liberal antislavery activist colonises Africa'.<sup>15</sup> Bartle Frere had been an active moderniser for the government in India and was critical of the ongoing internal slave trade in East Africa in the 1870s but accelerated the violent conquest of still independent black southern African polities.

<sup>15</sup> Lester, *Deny & Disavow*, p. 64.



**Fig. 2.** Discussing the statue of Bartle Frere at Whitehall Gardens. (Photo author's own).



**Fig. 3.** Discussing the statue of Wolseley (in reflection) in Horse Guards Parade. (Photo by Alice Corble, reproduced with permission).

Similar historical geographies of ‘imperial careering’ were told of Field-Marshal Viscount Wolseley.<sup>16</sup> The plinth upon which his statue stands, in Horse Guards Parade (see Fig. 3), plots his career in ‘Burmah 1852–3, Crimea 1854–5, Indian Mutiny 1857–9, China 1860–1, Red River 1870, Ashanti 1873–4, South Africa 1879, Egypt 1882, Soudan 1884–5’ crowned by his role as ‘Commander-in-Chief of the British Army 1895–1900’.

The last statue we discussed was that of Robert Clive ‘of India’, situated between the Treasury and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) buildings. Clive had led the capture of Calcutta in 1756 from the young nawab of Bengal, also extracting reparations and securing direct access to vastly profitable trade and further extension of imperial control in the region, to Clive’s immense profit. When he died in 1774 he was a controversial figure, associated with East India Company greed and excess. It was only 125 years later, with Clive recuperated as a supposed founder of British civilisation in India, that a campaign for a monument in his honour was launched, the statue being erected in 1912 and moved to its current location in 1916. As with the belated erection of the Colston statue in Bristol, the statuary moment can mark imperial anxiety as much as imperial triumph.<sup>17</sup>

Clive featured again in our afternoon tour of the remarkable FCDO building, including a talk on applied history by Dr Maeve



**Fig. 4.** Clive in the Durbar Court. (Photo author’s own).

Ryan and a guided tour by Foreign Office historian Patrick Salmon. The building incorporated the nineteenth century Foreign, Colonial, and India Offices, the latter marked out by its superior marble stonework and the astonishing Durbar Court. The open heart of the India Office, which coordinated imperial policy in India, the court is a masterpiece of Victorian orientalism, a symbolically overloaded amalgam of history and geography in architecture. Atop columns around the courtyard are the names of India’s major cities and, higher, its major rivers and presidencies. In the four corners stand statues of significant Governor-Generals, including Clive, standing over a depiction of his victory over the young nawab (Fig. 4). Overlooking the court, in the India Office Council Chamber stands the vast fireplace from the original East India House in Leadenhall Street, depicting India, Persia, China and the Americas offering up their goods to Britannia.

We exited via the Foreign Office’s Grand Staircase, adorned with Sigismund Goetze’s murals, painted during and after the First World War. They depict a mythologised birth and maturation of the Anglo-Saxon race, depicted in triumph in 1918 as ‘Britannia

<sup>16</sup> *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century* ed. by David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Choksey, ‘Colston Falling’.

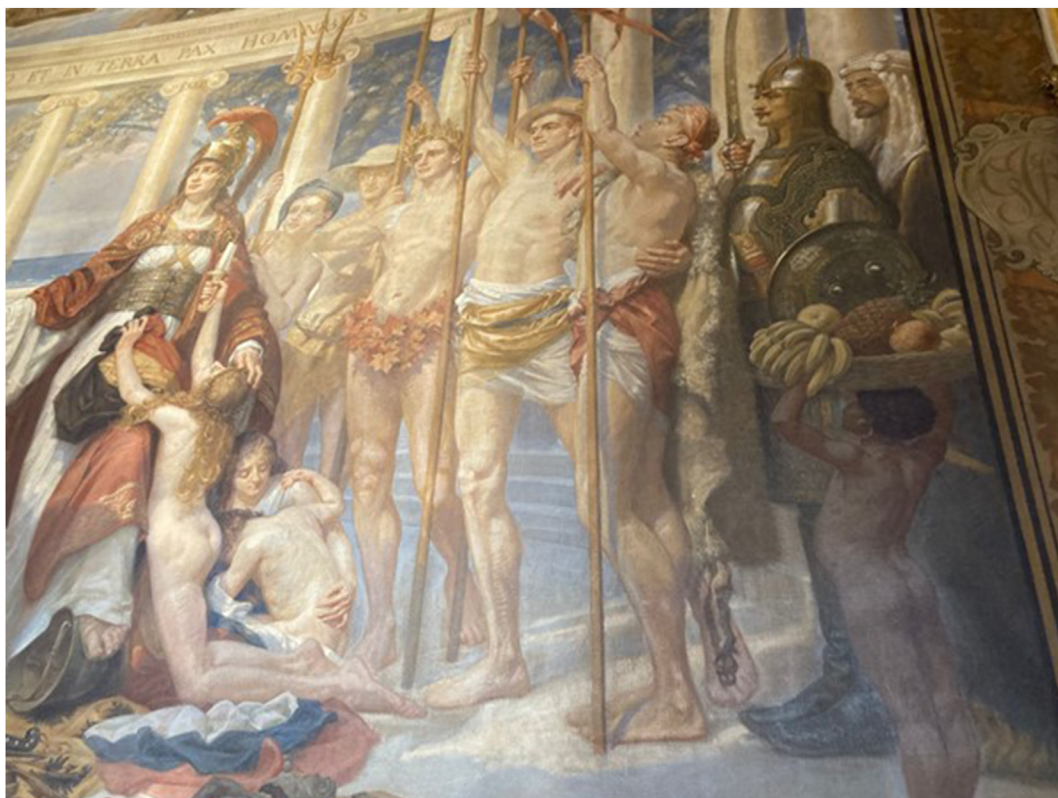


Fig. 5. 'Britannia Pacificatrix' on the Great Staircase of the Foreign Office. (Photo by Jo Wilcox, reproduced with permission).

Pacificatrix', the peacemaker (Fig. 5). The orientalist and racist symbology will be familiar to geographers who have studied Walter Crane's illustrations around the Imperial Federation Map.<sup>18</sup> But for many attendees on our tour, the depiction of Africa in the form of a naked, black youth, supporting the fruits of empire in a bowl on their head, was profoundly disturbing.<sup>19</sup> Patrick Salmon explained that it had been difficult to produce a plaque of text to explain and critically engage with the images that met with the approval of both ministers and the FCDO's Race and Ethnicity Network.

On the final day we reflected on our experience in London. It was clear that officials at the FCDO also had an interest in talking about British colonialism in the middle of a culture war, both in terms of engaging the British public but also in managing Britain's international, post-Brexit vision of itself as a global player. What came through most strongly was the emotional responses attendees had to the various sites. Learning the histories behind the public statues so many of us had walked past yet knew nothing about was fascinating. But the FCDO building, perhaps because it was private (if government) space elicited much stronger emotions, through its paintings and murals depicting a feminised and servile India or an infantilised and slave-like Africa. The responses amongst people of colour were strong here, but white attendees also spoke of their feeling of estrangement and anger in this space, which was read as a 'white space'.

Lester delivered a final lecture on settler colonialism, marking its unsettling of First Nations communities, the violent but legalised appropriation of land, and the vast migration of Britons (estimated at 22.6 million between 1815 and 1914) to these imperial frontiers. This prevented a feared Malthusian population and moral crisis at home but created political crisis for Indigenous communities abroad, resulting in wars and also genocides to settle new lands.

We concluded by asking each other what we could do now, in the middle of a culture war, where expertise was denigrated, and political policies were openly based on post-truth populist campaigns? The first thing was to tell our truths about empire, using detailed and fact-based historical geographies, which eschew easy dichotomies and advertise the value of evidenced, detailed historical reconstruction. The public discourse, of which Lester's publications and social media campaigns are part, were felt to have affected some of this change in recent years, in part testimony to what activist public campaigning, and historical geography at large, can achieve.

#### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Alan Lester and all the participants for discussions on the day and since. I would also like to thank Patrick Salmon for commenting on the paper.

<sup>18</sup> Pippa Biltcliffe, 'Walter Crane and the Imperial Federation Map Showing the Extent of the British Empire (1886)', *Imago Mundi* 57 (2005) 63–69.

<sup>19</sup> Also see <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/jun/15/nandy-raises-question-over-foreign-office-racial-goetze-murals>, last accessed 22 September 2023.