

Letter from Scotland

There is plenty to dislike about Henry Dundas, the 1st Viscount Melville.

He was the clever Scots lawyer who became the London establishment's "fixer" during the 1770s, 80s and 90s.



Henry Dundas by Sir Thomas Lawrence

Among his unpleasant tasks was to delay the abolition of the slave trade, for 15 long years (1792-1807) during which another half million slaves were transported from Africa to the American plantations.

But he is now being held to account by the "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations that have swept the world since the death of George Floyd, including here in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen.



Stand Up To Racism Edinburgh. 10 June 2020 Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

The Dundas statue, stands on top of a preposterous 40 metre

column in St Andrew Square in Edinburgh. It has been the subject of an uneasy debate between those who want to tear it down, as they did with the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol last weekend.

Then there are those who want to rebrand it as a monument to the memory of those who died during the years of slavery.

The council agreed on Thursday the [form of wording for a plaque](#) to be added to the base. The committee which had been trying to agree it for two years had reached an impasse. Professor Sir Geoff Palmer who is a member of the committee told protesters at the Black Lives Matter demo in Holyrood Park last week that he wanted the statue to remain in place, saying “if you remove the statue you remove the deed”.

And finally for now part of the speech by [@SirGeoffPalmer](#) who urges leaving the Henry Melville Dundas statue in place in St Andrew Square – but with a plaque to explain the history of the man – a gradual abolitionist – who he says caused the deaths of a further 600,000 slaves pic.twitter.com/Ggow0blnnR

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [June 7, 2020](#)

There’s a similar debate going on in Glasgow over statues, buildings and street names honouring the cotton and tobacco barons who squeezed their wealth out of their black slaves in the American colonies.

I hadn’t really been forced to think about it before, but I’m with the “rebranding” school. We should keep these statues, however bizarre and even grotesque, and attach to them a plaque which tells both sides of their story. It’s harsh to judge actions with the benefit of hindsight.

It’s true that Scotland produced many a slave master – Robert Burns was considering becoming one at a desperate point in his

life – but we have also produced medical missionaries like David Livingstone who fought hard against the slave trade at home and in Africa. And not all slave traders were white.

George Floyd's final words "I can't breathe" have haunted me all week. It applies to so many of our current troubles; to the social and economic suffocation felt by black people, even in our own country; to the coronavirus pandemic; to what we are doing to the planet with our carbon emissions. The face mask has become the symbol of our suffocating age.

But we are going to emerge from it, aren't we? This week, the R number, the Covid-19 reinfection rate, has gone down to between 0.6 and 0.8. The death rate continues to fall, for the sixth successive week. On two days there were no deaths registered at all. Construction sites are back in action again and [holiday businesses](#) are being told to prepare for re-opening on 15 July 2020.

But lest we forget, the death toll from the virus stands at over 4,000. [Scotland has the third highest death rate per million](#) population in the world (after Belgium and England.) And we are still only testing a third of the staff in our care homes. So Nicola Sturgeon has kept our lockdown stricter than in England and in most other countries. She is adamant that she will not reduce the two-metre social distancing rule, despite pressure from business leaders, who say it will ruin them.

Our clever scientists say they have managed to track down exactly how the virus arrived in Scotland. By examining the genetic make-up of 466 individual virus samples, they have traced 113 separate strains, all of which are related to foreign travel. This is heartening news for the government's new "test and protect" strategy, because it shows we might be able to stamp out the virus one outbreak at a time. In the first fortnight of the programme, 681 people came forward and tested positive, leading to 741 contacts being asked to self-

isolate for 14 days.

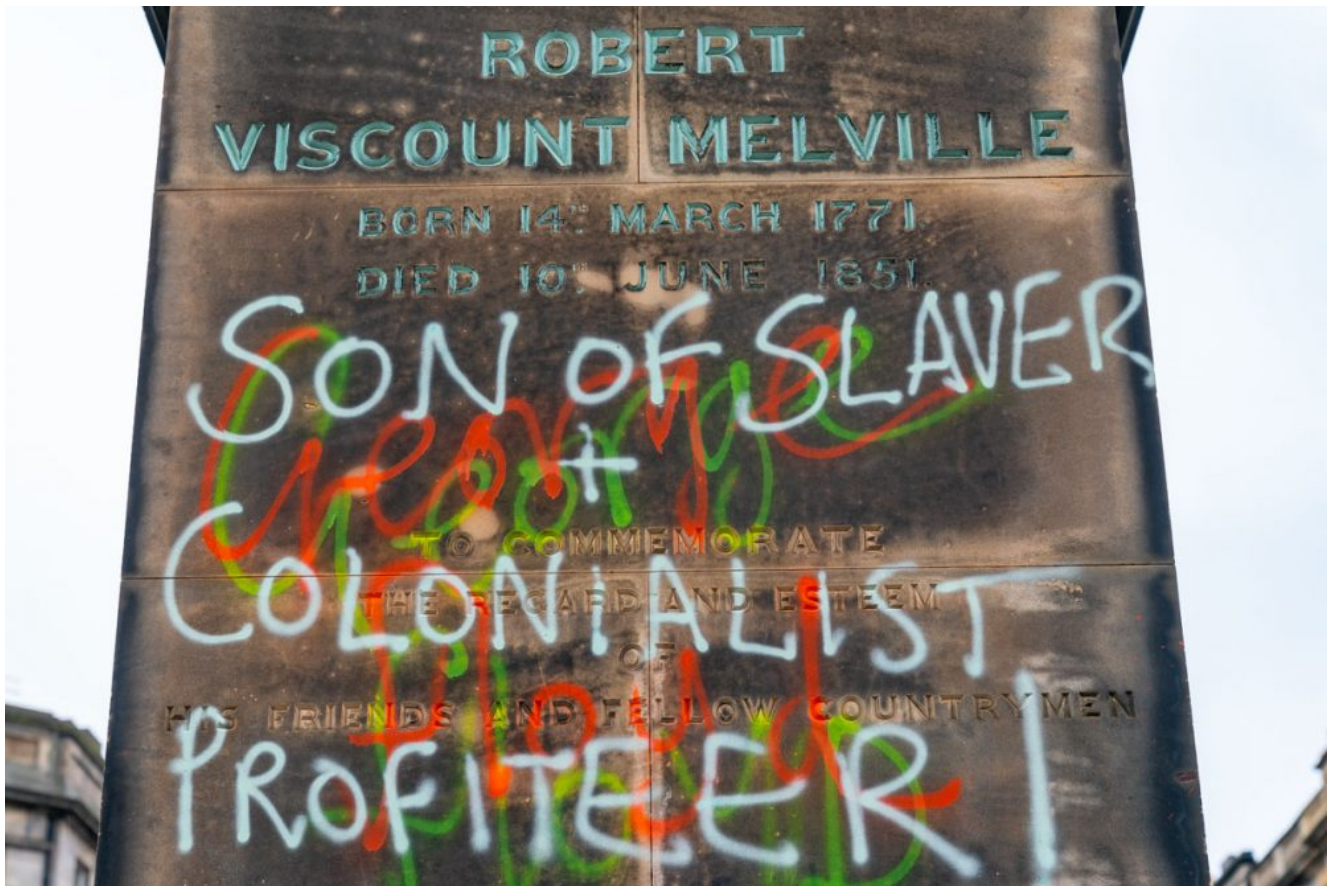
And to underline the effectiveness of the system, the Chief Medical Officer Dr Gregor Smith, reported that the controversial outbreak at a Nike sportswear conference in Edinburgh in February had been successfully contained. You can watch Dr Smith below explaining all of the science.

We are now bracing ourselves for the economic tsunami. An OECD report this week suggested that Britain would be one of the worst countries affected, with an 11 per cent fall in national income quite possible. We have 774,000 workers in Scotland on the UK government's job retention scheme. What happens when that runs out in October ? Will there be a further round of job support and company bailouts ?

If there is, I hope the money goes to industries that employ a lot of people immediately and don't pollute the planet too much – house building, care and social work, the arts, sport and education. This week the former first minister Labour's Jack McConnell called for as big an effort to get schools back in action as there was to prepare hospitals for the coronavirus.

And in the long run, I'd like to see government investment in the rail system and in green energy. This week the Crown Estate opened the bidding for 10 new off-shore wind farm sites around the Scottish coast. Oil companies should be encouraged to get involved.

Finally, I wonder if we will erect statues commemorating the leaders of our own age and what will future generations think of them. Will they be torn down as symbols of cruelty, ineptitude and cowardice or will there be carefully worded plaques to explain their shortcomings?



Statue of Robert 2nd Viscount Melville on Melville Crescent defaced by those protesting about perceived links to slavery. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmccadam.com