

No statute of limitation on the limitations of statues

The controversial Melville Monument in St Andrew Square could take on an innovative new digital life according to historian and former journalist Chris Holme.

The memorial to Henry Dundas, (1st Viscount Melville), former Lord Advocate, MP and First Lord of the Admiralty, has caused division for years due to his central role in delaying the abolition of slavery.

The City of Edinburgh Council recently placed a temporary plaque on the monument to record Dundas's role in imposing colonial rule on indigenous peoples and in facilitating the continuation of the slave trade until 1807, which led to more than half a million Africans being enslaved.

Chris, founder of The History Company which specialises in bringing together historical content, said the 150ft tall statue could be put to more appropriate use for the digital age.



Chris Holme of The History Company

He said: "Henry Dundas has left us with a problem, but not so much his figure atop the column which is already out of sight with only defecating pigeons for company – more the 1500 tons column which supports him. But instead of destroying it or defacing it, we could harness creative energies and skills to fashion something new through digital remastering."

One use could be to screen films in St Andrew Square which would feature contemporary Black Scottish voices. Possible screenings could include the Stewart Kyasimire documentary Black and Scottish; 1745 – An Untold Story of Slavery; the poem A Scottish Solder by Makar Jackie Kay about Arthur Roberts who fought with the King's Own Scottish Borderers in WW1; and David Hayman's two part documentary Slavery: Scotland's Hidden Shame.

Chis added: "The column itself is wide and tall enough for projecting images with accompanying sound and there is no shortage of material. It could feature, for example, the cross of St Andrew on the flag of Jamaica, contemporary caricatures of Dundas or panels from the Scottish Diaspora Tapestry."



Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Time to get creative with the Melville Monument
Digital technology offers ready access to historical primary sources, said Chris, and this has helped fuel renewed public interest in Scotland's links with the slave trade which is mirrored by new research by academic historians.

As Chris points out, St Andrew Square has been repurposed before – in 1918 as a hutted village built by the American YMCA to serve soldiers on leave from the war, while the south side of the square has been largely rebuilt in recent years and will soon have a fresh focus alongside the new Edinburgh St James Centre.

He added: “We have time to reflect further on this, there isn’t a statute of limitations on the limitations of statues. Edinburgh has around 200 statues and virtually all have one thing in common. Essentially, they are mostly white blokes set fast in stone, bronze or lead, but we can now interrogate them using tools they couldn’t have imagined.

“Creative talents across all the arts have been denied expression by Covid-19 which this year for the first time has also drawn the curtain on Edinburgh’s festivals. But with every problem comes an opportunity and it is time to put our thinking caps on.”

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