

MUSINGS

On Shelley, Shoes and the Shifting of Statues

JOHN DREW

Where do you stand on this matter of pulling down statues, a hot topic during the ongoing Black and Indigenous Lives Matter campaigns? Do you favour putting up statues at all? Who, if anyone, would you put one up to?

LAWLEY

In one of R. K. Narayan's delightful stories about the small town of Malgudi immediately following Indian Independence, the Municipal Chairman,

shoulders fit into the front hall. The rest stretches out into the street.

Worse still, when the journalist sends this story up to Madras and it is published, it provokes a national outcry. Sir Fred had been a thoroughly good fellow: cleared jungles, established the first co-op in India, dug canals, argued for self-government and died saving villagers from a flood. Malgudi is shamed. They must put his statue back up.

century Edward Colston in Bristol was toppled by demonstrators. Although a local benefactor, Colston's profits had been made on the back of the Slave Trade. His statue was briefly replaced by one of a feisty young protester, Jen Reid, who had jumped up onto the plinth after the statue had been pulled down.

Should the imposing old statue be restored, perhaps with an updated inscription on its plaque? Should it be replaced by the livelier, contemporary one of the young protester? Should there be two statues, confronting each other with their differing outlooks? Or should the plinth be left empty?

Currently Colston's statue, rescued from its watery grave in Bristol harbour, lies on its side in a Museum, captioned with a fuller account of his life. Statues once brought down and no longer so high and mighty can even become rather endearing. Some years ago you could see a statue of Edward VII reclining in wasteland adjoining New Delhi Railway Station. The king looked like just another weary traveller who couldn't afford a third class ticket.

Bristol has another (unnewsworthy) statue: that of Edmund Burke, who (in one of history's intriguing might-have-beens) turned down a job in Bengal the year Hastings became Governor. Time has not yet taken its toll on Burke's conservative principles, although his paternalist attitude to Africans and Slavery is now questionable. Whose in 18th century Britain isn't? Whose in the 21st century isn't? Elsewhere too? Hubshees?

CLIVE

Surprisingly, Burke was an apologist for Clive of (don't make the palasi trees laugh at such a breeze) India? There's a statue of British India's first Governor of Bengal in London's Whitehall. It was commissioned not in his own lifetime but in 1911. Its erection at a time when the imperial capital was being removed to Delhi in part on account of increased nationalist agitation in Bengal was even then criticised as unduly provocative. Its continued presence is proving just as controversial.

If Clive, who now stands outside

the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (with its grand Durbar Hall), is not destined to be relegated to, say, Churchill's war-time bunker beneath his feet, perhaps he should at least be confronted in King Charles Street by a new statue of a famine-wracked Bengali peasant family?

And why only in London? Should we suppose such an idea horrifies the bhadrakol of Kolkata? At the moment not only does a statue of the scavenging Clive perch unchallenged in Lord Curzon's triumphalist Victoria Memorial but one of Edward VII also travels in the Viceroy's train. How long will it be before these dusty relics fade into a jadoo ghar of curiosities?

GANDHI

Few, if any, statues can escape becoming one of Time's laughing-stocks. Anti-imperialists felt vindicated when, several years ago, a statue of Winston Churchill (also known to Bengal) was joined outside the Houses of Parliament in London by that of the man he once described (inaccurately) as posing as a fakir, Mohandas Gandhi.

Hardly had this statue gone up – complaints concerning the long suffering of both Churchill's and Gandhi's wives being summarily dismissed – than students in some parts of Africa began pulling down statues of Gandhi. In London, his was even tarred with the same (anti-racist paint) brush as Churchill's. In his own country, of course, it was not his statue but the man himself who had been brought down.

WORKER

Culture Wars concerning the erection or demolition of statues of figures caught in the tangled web of history invariably serve contemporary political agendas. After the Fall of Communism in 1989, the City Government in Budapest pulled down some 40 statues erected during the previous socialist regime. They did not tip these into the Danube but consigned them to a park on the outskirts of town.

Among the exhibits are several to ordinary workers. These, if any, might have been left standing? They are surely less objectionable and subject

to the changes brought about by Time than those of ideologically committed politicians and other such dignitaries?

SHELLEY

The absurdity of having statues at all may best be illustrated by that of the poet Shelley at University College, Oxford. Leave aside that, commissioned by the family, not the college, the statue was originally intended for Rome, not Oxford. Leave aside that, until properly protected, it was regularly subject to trashing from foolish students. Leave aside the ultimate absurdity that the college actually expelled Shelley.

More to the point, Shelley, England's most visionary poet – read *Prometheus Unbound* set in the Indian Caucasus if you don't believe it – would not have wished to be transixed in anything so material as a statue, beautiful as may be its marble representation of his recumbent dead body. In Bengal, he would have been a baul. *Drive my dead thoughts over the universe! Like wither'd leaves, to quicken a new birth.* Shelley is a spirit.

SHOES

If you want a statue at all, one attractive possibility is featured in a poem by Earle Birney. He records how alien he, a Canadian tourist, feels one day slinking guiltily through the impoverished Latin American town of Cartagena de Indias. Suddenly, to his amazement, he comes upon a statue of a pair of old, battered shoes.

Upon further enquiry, since the plaque under the statue does not (like plaques in Bristol and London) tell enough, he discovers the town once had a poet, Luis Lopez, who was utterly infuriated by the squalor of his native place. The best Lopez could say of it was that it was like a pair of old shoes you loved and couldn't get rid of. After his death the town chose to raise this form of memorial to the poet.

Human beings have feet of clay. Better not to put up statues of them? Just of their shoes? Or, for those who don't have any shoes, their feet of clay?

John Drew once wrote a book of verse-fables about a statue, *The Buddha at Kamakura*.



having made money from profiteering during the War, decides to make a name for himself by pulling down the statue of tyrannical British imperialist Sir Frederick Lawley.

Pulling down a twenty-foot statue proves difficult and costly. The Chairman finally persuades a local journalist who publicises his doings to take on its removal for its value as scrap metal. Once dynamited and dragged to the journalist's house, only its head and

At first, the out-of-pocket journalist refuses to return the statue. Eventually, he persuades the Chairman to part with some of his ill-gotten gains and win national applause as a benefactor by buying his house and re-erecting the statue there.

COLSTON & BURKE

Arguments about statues of British imperialists in Britain itself came into fresh focus last year when one of 17th

NONFICTION

The Puddle-Jumper

SOHANA MANZOOR



It was a hot August afternoon when I stood on the tarmac at the St Louis airport staring at the tiny 7-seater that looked like a toy plane. *What? I thought. I would have to get on that? Was this some kind of a joke?* Three other passengers were also waiting, but they seemed strangely unperturbed.

My journey had already lasted 48 hours, and this was the final leg of my trip. Two days earlier, I had flown from Dhaka to New York, then stayed overnight with a friend of a friend. Then onward from New York to St Louis, Missouri, and now remained the final part – getting from St Louis to Carbondale, Illinois, the small town in southern Illinois where I was to begin my PhD studies. Here I was at St Louis with my two suitcases, my first time in the US, and now this flimsy-looking toy plane beckoned with its wings outstretched.

Unfortunately, there is no easy way to get from St Louis to Carbondale. One option is to take a shuttle van. For whatever reason, my friend who had made my travel arrangements chose this option – a small regional service called Cape Air. As for me, whatever I had imagined this small plane to be, I certainly had not envisioned something out of *Fantasy Island*, the TV series from the '80s. I was sure nobody at home would believe that I was sure nobody could find such planes in the US. I was also convinced that I was about to die in a crash-landing before even beginning my studies.

Forty minutes later, after a bumpy ride, I landed in Marion, a small town close to Carbondale. A huge signboard greeted us: "Williamson County Regional Airport." A small single-storey building stood not too far away and I was told that this was the airport building. I along with a few others found ourselves in the middle of a cleared ground. A few horses grazed peacefully in a nearby field and I believe I saw a donkey, too. They seemed unfazed by our arrival. I looked askance at the toy plane and thanked my stars that I was still in one piece. Much later, a friend of mine told me, "Oh, that's not what you call an airplane -- that's a puddle-jumper." Never heard anything so apt.

After the initial hiccup, however, I soon learnt my way around. Travelling those

days certainly was not an easy feat for me, especially as I did not own a car. The nearest major airport was in St. Louis, Missouri, which was more than two hours drive from our small town. The other option from Marion and take a Cape Air flight to St. Louis. I travelled quite often and many of the fun experiences I have had are associated with the St. Louis and Marion airports. The flight from Marion to St. Louis was cheap -- only \$50, whereas the shuttle van from Carbondale to St. Louis would cost \$70 plus a \$5 tip for the driver. For a graduate student on a stipend, it made quite a difference. Hence I preferred the little Cessna, where you could also get discounts in the off season and during early mornings.

There were, however, some problems with the tiny aircraft. Most importantly, it had no heating or cooling system. One summer, as

My journey had already lasted 48 hours, and this was the final leg of my trip. Two days earlier, I had flown from Dhaka to New York, then stayed overnight with a friend of a friend. Then onward from New York to St Louis, Missouri, and now remained the final part -- getting from St Louis to Carbondale, Illinois, the small town in southern Illinois where I was to begin my PhD studies.

I was waiting with other passengers at the airport, I noticed the airport staff distributing frozen water bottles. I was wondering what they were for when an elderly woman guffawed, "It's that hot, eh?" I could not quite fathom the reason yet, but it certainly was hot that day. I felt nauseated after about 20 minutes in the air and was wondering what

the consequences would be if I threw up on the co-pilot who was seated right in front of me. The woman who had laughed at the airport opened her water bottle and started sprinkling the ice-cold water over herself. "Just do what you have to, honey; I don't want to pass out," she muttered. I followed her example and soon everybody else was doing the same thing. It took another 20 minutes to reach St. Louis, and I surely was feeling dizzy when I climbed out of the aircraft.

Usually, the little plane was not too crowded. But the holiday season was a different story. One December, when I was going to visit my aunt, I found the small county airport quite full of people. Many were going off to visit their families elsewhere for Christmas. One officer at the airport announced, "We sold nine tickets. If all the passengers show up, we'll kick out the co-pilot." Believe it or not, that is exactly what they had to do because all nine turned up. As the puddle-jumper started to move, I saw the co-pilot standing outside. As he was wearing headgear and sunglasses, I could not be sure whether he was happy or relieved. I certainly did not like the overcrowded interior, which also felt cold. The winter air outside was sharp and the lack of heating made us acutely aware of it.

As you can understand, there was no lavatory inside the puddle-jumper. Since the ride was short, it was not really necessary. Just to be on the safe side, however, I always visited the washroom right before boarding. On my way back from Boston once, I ran to the lavatory one last time in St. Louis. But as I tried to unlock the door, to my dismay I found that it was stuck. I tried everything I could think of, but as it happens during emergency situations, it refused to budge. I struggled and banged on the door, but to no avail. And nobody seemed to be around either.

Then suddenly, I realized that this was a public toilet and there was a one-foot gap under the door. I braced myself and decided to crawl out of the stall on all fours. Then again, my backpack, which was quite bulky, got caught at the bottom of the door. I had forgotten to take it off my back. It took quite some yanking and extra effort to finally get through. A heavyset woman in the middle of removing her make-up, was just turning away from the basin and she almost yelped, "Egad! Where did ye appear from?" She had earphones on and I could faintly hear music. No wonder she did not hear anything.

I sprinted and when I reached the gate, I found two faces behind the desk staring at me quizzically. "We called you so many

times. Where were you?" The plane had left the terminal and was not coming back for me, they said. I threw up my hands in despair and told them about my escapade in the bathroom. The young man went red and howled with laughter. The woman was trying hard not to crack up and asked me a few more questions. I felt sheepish. They shook their heads and finally the woman said, "All right, that is one hell of a story. So here, you can take the next flight after two hours. And you don't have to pay anything extra." She handed me a boarding pass and both of them started laughing so hard that I felt utterly mortified and walked away as fast as I could.

An acquaintance in Carbondale once asked, "How can you ride that *thing*?" Another, "Where's the oil tank? Ha ha ha." Even though I am infamous for quips, in these cases, I rarely replied. I was afraid that the stories I carried might sound too outrageous and somebody would try to tie me up the next time I planned to fly. I was the only Bangladeshi student in Carbondale who flew Cape Air to St. Louis on a regular basis. A few others who took it never bothered to fly a second time and they gave me odd looks. I am sure they thought I was half-witted or something. Tariq, a junior graduate student who became like a brother to me, once went to a conference in New York and he took the cessna. After his return he told me sternly, "Apu, next time when you go out of Carbondale, please tell me. I'll drive you to St. Louis myself. Goodness! How can you fly something like that so casually?"

So, that made my journeys on the puddle-jumper less frequent. When I finally left Carbondale, I was hoping to take one final ride. But my friends in that small town where I had lived for six years wanted to spend some more time with me. Hence we had one last ride together on the road to St. Louis. The trips I made on that flighty aircraft, however, are etched in my memory like precious landscapes. Puddle-jumping indeed! How I miss the puddle-jumper!

Sohana Manzoor is Associate Professor of English at ULAB. She is also the Literary Editor of The Daily Star.