

A speech by Rev Prof Diarmaid MacCulloch, Kt, at the opening of The Treasury

On 11 March 2016, donors and special guests attended Founder's Lunch at the Bodleian Libraries, an annual event honouring the memory of its founder, Sir Thomas Bodley, and his legacy of philanthropy. The event saw the formal opening of The Treasury, a gift from the Helen Hamlyn Trust. Rev Prof Diarmaid MacCulloch, Kt, Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, gave the following speech about The Treasury and its first exhibition, *Bodleian Treasures: 24 pairs*.

The Delights of Memory

I suspect that I am not the only ageing Oxford don who still treasures my childhood teddy bear. This is not because I'm trying to conform to some tourist expectation of *Brideshead Revisited* Oxford eccentricity, but it represents a more complex and layered grasping of my own past. The bear is called Rupert, for reasons which will be obvious to anyone of a certain age in this audience, and let's face it, most of us here are of a certain age. My mother was an excellent needlewoman, and she made Rupert an appropriate set of clothes carefully copied from the *Daily Express* comic strip: red jersey and yellow check trousers and scarf. There exists a studio photograph of myself and Rupert, not greatly different in size, and both looking very solemn.

As the years passed, and I grew to surly teenager's estate, I left behind my memories of Rupert, but my mother did not. She kept Rupert carefully, and there he was in her bedroom when she died at a great age, and I took home treasures from her retirement flat. So now Rupert is back in my bedroom, a slightly battered old bear sixty years on, but still immaculately dressed as his illustrator Alfred Bestall would have wished.

As Rupert sits in splendour, what does he signify? The oldest layers of significance in early childhood may be among the most important. Inevitably they are vague, but they are a constant and useful reminder to my present self-importance that once the most important thing in my life was Rupert Bear. Besides that, there is another inescapable theme: that mothers, in many not straightforward and often irritating ways, know best.

It is from such memories as these that we construct our sense of ourselves, and it is only through honest probing of those memories that we make that self-identity a source of sanity and balance. There is nothing wrong in taking pleasure by heaping up the good memories: there will be time enough for a rueful stock-taking of downsides. This pleasure is equally true for institutions, societies, nations and civilisations; in fact, it is a duty. Without memories, and the chance to dwell on them and sift them affectionately but sensibly, we lose our true sense of ourselves, and we go collectively insane. That is the chief justification for libraries and archives, and that is why it is such a good work to cherish them and build them up. And here we are honouring a palace among libraries, where the custodians and their generous donors have chosen to share Bodley's memories in the Helen Hamlyn gallery.

This week I had the delightful privilege of a personal tour of the gallery from Richard and his colleague Francesca Galligan, who led the planning in the first version of its contents that we have seen. There were many pleasures, encounters with both classic treasures and with new friends not met before, but as you will realise as you browse, the deeply satisfying side of Francesca's scheme is that the treasures that everyone wants and expects to see are paired with something else which has a quirky, oblique or unexpected relationship to it. The effect is like a game of 'Consequences', where the Magna Carta met a Suffragette in the Hamlyn gallery, and it said to her, and she said to Magna Carta ...

I think that my favourite juxtaposition (against strong competition) sprang from the thousand-year-old Caedmon manuscript, with its precious fragments of Anglo-Saxon poetry, but also displaying a wonderful half-page illustration of figures with outstretched hands, their forms perhaps taken from even older illustrations of Roman theatrical gestures in some other manuscript now long crumbled into dust.

In the display case, this MS Junius 11 sits beside an illustration by John Tenniel of Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking Glass*, where Alice is surprised by arrival of the messenger who is 'skipping up and down, and wriggling like an eel ... with his great hands spread out like fans on each side'. The White King reproaches her – for he points out that this is an Anglo-Saxon messenger who naturally is striking 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes'.

The Caedmon manuscript was on display in Bodley when Dodgson was writing *Alice and Tenniel* was turning the book into pictures, and it is thought that the manuscript figures with their elongated hands were the source of Dodgson's learned joke. So these two books, nine centuries apart in age, speak not only to each other, but to a still more remote cultural past in Roman drama. Then the sequence of echoes and cultural conversations continues and jumps forward out of this display-case into my own lifetime, when Angus Wilson redeployed 'Anglo-Saxon Attitudes' as the title of one of his best comic novels, which I feel is well overdue for popular rediscovery, and I recommend it to you if you don't know it.

You will remember that the late Umberto Eco beautifully expressed this conversation of texts in the course of describing that most sinister and characterful of libraries which is the antihero of *The Name of the Rose*: it was 'the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, ... a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the death of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors.' The point of such juxtapositions as we have in the Helen Hamlyn Gallery is that memory is never simple or linear or univocal. A bear does not have to be just a bear. Healthy and productive memory is complex, and its fruits are the richer and more tasty because of the complexity.

That is why it seems to me that the current 'Rhodes must fall' campaign is profoundly wrong-headed. Its objectives admittedly stand in a commendably ethical spectrum which demands a range of graduated conclusions, but this campaign is the wrong choice of conclusion. It is wrong-headed because it takes a single object, a bust of Cecil Rhodes, and chooses to freight it with only one meaning out of the many which the object possesses, and not necessarily the most important. As it seizes on this one meaning – Rhodes was a racist and imperialist – it refuses to recognise the complexity even of those two labels, and it chooses not to leave the object to stand for thoughtful or rueful reflection, as if the reality of the history would go away by removing the symbol. Even more ridiculous is the parallel campaign elsewhere to get rid of statues of Queen Victoria, on the grounds that they are symbols of Empire. On that criterion, Rome would demolish the Colosseum and Trajan's Column. That way, not just madness lies, but self-styled Islamic State.

Oriel has decided to opt for complexity and reflection in its refusal to remove the bust of Rhodes. Jesus College, Cambridge, has with due reflection chosen to make a different choice, and I think rightly, in the case of a splendid Benin bronze cockerel which since its looting in the 1890s has stood in a prominent place to represent the College's fifteenth-century heraldic emblem, derived from its founder Bishop Alcock. Jesus has removed the bronze from its public setting and is considering whether to restore it to Nigeria. The choice at Jesus is precisely between the different value of competing memories; the sacred character of the bronze in its original setting versus its casual appropriation for a symbol which has plenty of other possible expressions in a Cambridge college. The decision is at a different place on the ethical spectrum to that of Oriel on Rhodes.

That is the point of a sensible use of memory. We make grown-up choices, and we can generally, with thought, come to constructive decisions about the most appropriate way to remember and express what has shaped our lives. At one extreme end of the spectrum of ethical choices on commemoration, it was obviously right in 1945 to rename the hundreds of streets through Europe called Adolf Hitler Strasse. In 1961, few mourned the passing of Stalinallee in Berlin, though now its present name is the subject of further lively discussion. I remember an enjoyable visit in 2000 to the significantly-named Memento Park on the outskirts of Budapest, created after 1989 as a retirement home for a great number of heroic Socialist Realist sculptures wished on the Hungarian capital in the years of Communism. It was far better, I thought, to line them up here in a spirit of gentle satire than to indulge in an orgy of vengeful destruction; that would have been the Stalinist way. Accordingly in the gift-shop, I bought a candle which was a bust of Lenin. I wonder what the present authoritarian government of Hungary makes of this delicate mockery of dictatorship. Dictators may be completely opposed to each other in ideology, but no dictator likes the sound of sniggering at authority.

When I left Rupert Bear behind many years ago, the trade I chose was that of the historian, so my business is precisely memory and its delights. I am always conscious of the historian's power, which is to shape the future by describing the past; it is a responsibility not to be taken lightly, and it needs a sturdy independence of mind. 1800 years ago, Lucian wrote the

historian's job description which our profession must always follow (apologies for his Roman gender-specificity): 'The most important thing by far is that he should be a free spirit, fear nobody, and expect nothing ... determined ... to call figs figs and a tub a tub.'

When we write history, our business is not rejoicing. We must not toady either to dictators or stridently well-meaning mobs. But our independence would be nothing worth, had we not the work of scholarly librarians and archivists, conservationists and above all generous and public-spirited donors, to keep our collective Teddy Bears safe and ready to hand. And there is nothing wrong in having a little fun as we historians pursue our noble task of saving the world's sanity. So I salute both the Bodleian Library and the generous benefactors who have made this splendidly refurbished building possible.

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