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# UK INSTITUTIONS CONFRONT THE SHADOWS OF IMPERIALISM

Research universities with links to the former British Empire are grappling with their racist, colonialist pasts. **By Philip Ball**

In February, the nineteenth-century naturalist Thomas Henry Huxley, escaped – in the eyes of some – from ‘cancellation’ at one of London’s most prestigious academic institutions. Huxley, a prominent advocate of Darwin’s theory of natural selection, promoted the racist view that Black people had inferior capabilities compared with white people. A report prepared in November 2021 by a team of faculty members and internal and external advisers at Imperial College London had recommended stripping Huxley’s name from the mathematics and computing

department building, and removing his bust from the entrance hall (see [go.nature.com/3smu1xf](https://go.nature.com/3smu1xf)).

But after extensive consultation, the Imperial administrators decided not to accept the recommendation, and are instead now discussing other options: contextualizing Huxley’s status and views, and adding the name of a scientist associated with the college who is from an under-represented ethnic group to the Huxley Building. The decision was largely an attempt to balance the report’s recommendations with the views expressed by the

university community in the consultations that followed its publication.

Not everyone agrees that this is the right move – especially those who have felt the sting of racism in their daily work as researchers. “The purpose of naming a building after someone is to honour that person,” says Rahma Elmahdi, a Black clinician and epidemiologist at Aalborg University and Hillerød Hospital in Copenhagen. Elmahdi, who earned a PhD at Imperial and previously worked there, adds: “I think it is an insult to the Black people who continue to work and study in a building



Wayne Mitchell, a teaching fellow at Imperial, says racism from the past is still felt today.

named after a person who was so adamant in questioning their capabilities and equality.”

Whatever the eventual outcome, the fractious debate about how to deal with the cultural and institutional legacies of racism and colonialism will surely continue. The debate was largely catalysed by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement after the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in May 2020. In the United Kingdom, a key initial focus was the toppling of a statue of slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020. That action polarized public opinion, with some UK government ministers suggesting that history was being ‘erased’. The arguments became part of the ‘culture wars’ – and British scientific institutions, along with others around the world, have been drawn into them.

Although the US debate has focused largely on systemic racism in the context of slavery and civil rights, the flashpoints in the United Kingdom are imperialism and colonialism, which involved white Europeans exploiting other ethnic groups, especially through the slave trade and oppression of Indigenous people.

Scientific ideas and institutions were intimately connected to that legacy; in London, the capital of the British Empire, that is particularly apparent. Most obviously, Imperial College, an amalgamation of several earlier institutions, founded in 1907 – when the Empire was at its height, covering nearly one-quarter of Earth’s total land area – is named for it. (Some commented on the irony of the Huxley Building being potentially renamed while the institution’s name remained.)

Imperial is one of a handful of UK scientific institutions examining racism in their own histories, and how to acknowledge and redress

its legacy. Other institutions and scientific departments around the globe are seeking to recast curricula and address racism’s influence in shaping their fields.

### Exclusion in higher education

“If Imperial does not honestly contend with its history of racism, it makes it easy for Black students and staff to continue to feel excluded and othered in their own institution,” says Elmahdi. And it’s not just, or even primarily, about names. “There are a lot of material changes that need to happen – funding, career progression, more opportunities that target previously excluded groups,” she says.

**“For people who have a heritage that is from the Empire, it’s something that does loom over us.”**

In the wake of BLM, Imperial College decided to remove the Latin motto from displays of the college’s crest, which loosely translates as ‘Science is the empire’s crown jewel and protector.’ When this was announced in 2020, “there was a backlash, and quite a few alumni wrote in expressing their displeasure”, says structural biologist Stephen Curry, Imperial’s assistant provost for equality, diversity and inclusion, who is white. He attributes some of this to “nervousness on the part of white men that any discussion around changing the status quo is seen as a threat to them. And to some extent, it is, as we have benefited from the established norms for so long.”

Imperial convened the History Group, chaired by chemical engineer Nilay Shah, and brought in historians from University College

London (UCL) and the University of Oxford, UK, to “examine the history of the College through its links to the British Empire, and to report on the current understanding and reception of the College’s legacy and heritage”, says the report. Meanwhile, a separate group looked at staff demographics and at the role of factors related to ethnicity in systems for promotions and grievances, as well as in student data, such as admissions, results and subsequent graduate employment.

The History Group’s report “highlighted contributions of people of colour and women who had been largely ignored”, says Elmahdi. “It helps to show the diversity and breadth of the college’s history.” Among other measures, it recommended that greater recognition be given to former alumni of colour, such as Nobel laureate physicist Abdus Salam, and to female staff such as Margaret White Fishenden, an engineer who became an assistant professor at Imperial in 1947.

The report says that Huxley’s 1865 essay *Emancipation – Black and White* “espouses a racial hierarchy of intelligence, a belief system of ‘scientific racism’ that fed the dangerous and false ideology of eugenics; legacies of which are still felt today”. For example, Huxley infamously wrote: “The highest places in the hierarchy of civilisation will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins.” The report argues that such abhorrent beliefs “fall far short of Imperial’s modern values”.

Like many faculty members at Imperial, Curry didn’t initially see a strong case for removing Huxley’s name and likeness. “Huxley was an abolitionist, pro-women in science, very progressive in his way,” he says. “There are many things to celebrate. But you can’t excuse the racism.” What changed his mind was hearing from Black staff members “about what walking into a building named after Huxley meant for them, and how it impacted their daily experience”.

The views that Huxley expressed “permeate even now”, says Wayne Mitchell, a senior teaching fellow in the department of medicine at Imperial, who is Black. “If you’re venerating someone [with those views], that’s where structural racism comes in – it is intertwined into the building itself.”

### Racism and lack of diversity linked

The evidence that racism and its attendant inequalities blight science today as much as they do wider society is irrefutable. “We have fewer than five Black faculty members at Imperial, out of about 1,600,” says Curry. But the wider scientific community is divided on how to confront those issues. Some say that renaming buildings is an irrelevant distraction from the more urgent and important task of improving diversity in the scientific workforce today.

But Elmahdi says that to pretend that the two issues are unrelated is to ignore the very

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problem: “For people who have a heritage that is from the Empire, and who attend or work in the college today, it’s something that does loom over us.”

Elmahdi suspects that some still feel that Black people and women are under-represented because they’re not good enough. “I know I am not a ‘diversity hire,’” she says, “but in order to explain why such comments are nonsense, we need to understand the [historical] background of institutions like this and why they were selective and exclusive, and how they were built literally through the exploitation of the Empire and the colonies – Imperial in particular.”

At the same time, today’s students of colour feel a sense of exclusion. Mitchell says that when he interviewed Imperial undergraduates from minority ethnic groups about their experiences at university, Black students kept commenting to the effect that “we know this place was never built with us intended to be here”.

“When you have a Huxley building, it’s like a confirmation of what their understanding is,” he says. Margaret Lawrence, an engagement officer at Imperial who is Black, says her position at an institution whose celebration of its past gives no heed to her own heritage makes her sometimes feel as though “I’m being offered a seat at the table, but I’m getting nothing to eat”.

That situation, Elmahdi says, “is exactly what Huxley was creating when he created his hierarchies – the idea that, if you’re not here, you’re not meant to be”. She feels that retaining Huxley’s name is inappropriate because it pays homage to not only his scientific contributions, but also what he stood for. She thinks that many at Imperial share this view, but that the voices of staff members of colour are often drowned out, or these individuals are hesitant to voice opinions that go against the majority.

## Aftershocks

Imperial’s then-president, chemist Alice Gast, supported the History Group report, issuing the statement: “While we cannot change history, we can find ways to clarify what it means, learn lessons from it, and ensure that we are not perpetuating legacies that we find abhorrent.”

Curry, an adviser to the group, was pleased that Imperial “had the guts to come out with this report”, but adds that “we knew that the Huxley thing would light the touchpaper”. Indeed, it did.

Imperial astrophysicist Stephen Warren wrote to British newspaper *The Times* saying that “I am sorry that [the report] has chosen to judge people from the past by the standards of today ... If Huxley is to be cancelled, no one from the past is secure.” And a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, another British newspaper, from an international group of academics argued that Huxley was hardly extreme or exceptional in his views. “For his scientific

# London’s science institutions take stock

**Universities and other institutions in the United Kingdom are reassessing how they engage with their chequered pasts.**

As science museums in the United Kingdom were considering how to respond to the BLM movement in the summer of 2020, Tilly Blyth, principal curator of the Science Museum in London, says “what struck us was the need for new research. We don’t know very much about how our collections link to imperial history, and we haven’t ever really enquired through that lens. That’s a massive hole in our understanding, and we need to do a lot more work and tell those untold stories.”

The Science Museum withdrew from its displays two objects that belonged to US pharmaceutical entrepreneur Henry Wellcome, because they lacked data on their provenance and historical context. The items were displayed simply as “slave whips” and “man-catcher” – “just placed in a case with no explanation”, says Blyth, who is white.

“It was a big decision, but I think the right one given the lack of context,” says Blyth. “We’ve only really started to scratch the surface.”

The Royal Society in London is also reappraising its past, which began in 1660. As such, it often reflects “attitudes and practices of previous centuries that are unacceptable today”, says its head of library and information services, Keith Moore, who is white. “There are past fellows with connections to Empire, the slave trade and slave ownership. There are also past fellows

accomplishments, his conviction that all men and women should be judged on their merits, civic mindedness, and the reforming zeal he brought to British science and education, we remain in his debt,” they wrote in January. (Huxley, however, expressed doubts that the intrinsic merits of Black people and of women were equal to those of white men.)

Although UCL geneticist Adam Rutherford, author of the 2020 book *How to Argue With a Racist*, was a signatory of that letter, he supported and participated in the reconsideration of the legacies of geneticists Francis Galton and Ronald A. Fisher and statistician Karl Pearson at UCL. The university elected to remove their names from the Galton Lecture Theatre, Pearson Building and R. A. Fisher Centre for Computational Biology in June 2020. The buildings, which UCL will consider renaming in

with connections to the abolition of slavery.”

Moore says the society has begun to broaden the diversity of stories that it tells about its history. “I’m very keen to extend our knowledge about the Royal Society’s past activities using independent historians.” The Society currently has two projects under way, led by university researchers, investigating its connections to slavery in Jamaica between 1660 and 1713 and to eugenics from 1860 to 1950.

The Linnaean Society in London – the natural-history society where Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace first presented their theories of evolution – was also conscious of a need to respond to the moment. The society is named after the eighteenth-century Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus, whose classification of races is often seen as one of the foundations of scientific racism.

“Linnaeus’s hierarchy, with Black people at the very bottom, stuck,” says Isabelle Charmantier, head of collections at the society, who is white.

The society started reviewing its heritage and collection before the BLM movement began, which accelerated such efforts. Anonymous Indigenous people produced many of the natural-history illustrations in the society’s collection from the colonial era that show Indian and Caribbean flora and fauna, and the society had begun to delve into who the artists were. “It’s a really exciting new area of research,” says Charmantier. “It’s not about replacing or erasing history, but enriching it.”

the future, are now known as Lecture Theatre 115, the North-West Wing and the Centre for Computational Biology, respectively.

Galton more or less created the field of eugenics – the supposed betterment of humanity by suppressing reproduction in people considered of ‘inferior stock’. All three men, says Rutherford, held virulently racist views, even by the standards of their time in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rutherford, who is of dual Anglo-Guyanese Indian heritage, says that UCL’s genetics, evolution and environment department has been particularly proactive in this sphere “precisely because so much of the history of this stuff happened in the department”.

The celebration of men such as Galton troubled evolutionary biologist Kevin Laland while he was a PhD student at UCL in the 1980s. “I

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really struggled with the unashamed hero worship and glorification of racist eugenicists like Galton and Fisher,” says Laland, who has dual Anglo-Indian heritage and is now at the University of St Andrews, UK. Every day, he entered a UCL building emblazoned with a plaque engraved with ‘Department of Genetics and Eugenics’. “It really upset me. I’d think, ‘Why on Earth has no one removed that?’”

And, he says, when academic conversations about evolution would inevitably sing the praises of Fisher, he found it hard not to feel a personal sting. “In suggesting that mixed-race marriages could lead to the degradation of British society and should be banned, or that the individuals concerned should be sterilized, and describing Asians as ‘barbarians’ and ‘savages’, it was hard not to think that it was my parents and people like me that Fisher was talking about.”

Rutherford says the genetics department’s decision to review Fisher’s legacy was autonomous and not reactive. “We’re not hiding our past, but we can choose whether to honour people’s names,” he says. “And we can use this as a pivoting point to teach that history.”

The difficult question is where to draw the lines. Rutherford contends that Galton, Pearson and Fisher represent very different cases from Huxley’s. He says that Huxley and Darwin expressed views that were typical of their time – which is not to excuse them, but rather to contextualize them. By contrast, he notes that both Pearson and Fisher were developing scientific ideas that served their political ideologies. “And Galton was an out-and-out racist, in public and private, throughout his life. Pearson was a horror, a racist and antisemite.”

When institutions celebrate the likes of Galton and Pearson, it “sends a clear [chilling] message to people who we should be going out of our way to include in science”, Rutherford says. Having better representation is important not just for diversity and equity, but because it encourages better science. “That seems like a no-brainer.”

### Re-examination leads to enrichment

Current discussions across UK institutions about their colonialist pasts mirror similar debates about Germany’s Nazi heritage in the decades after the Second World War and into the twenty-first century. In some cases, such reappraisal deepened, rather than ‘erased’, the historical understanding. For example, accusations that Dutch physicist Peter Debye colluded with the Nazi regime during his pre-war career in Germany led at first to his name being removed from a research institute at Utrecht University, the Netherlands. But it also motivated a deep dive into historical archives and revealed a fuller, more nuanced version of his legacy, and of how many scientists such as Debye, who disliked the Nazis, nonetheless



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**Voices of scientists of colour are often drowned out, says epidemiologist Rahma Elmahdi.**

found accommodation under their rule. Far from being ideological revisionism, such investigation can enrich the historical record.

This is what several science-based UK institutions are discovering (see ‘London’s science institutions take stock’). Why should science, generally so keen to acknowledge its potential for revision and impartiality from the role of individuals, have become so fixated on literally writing its past in stone? “When we hold these people in reverence, we don’t do the work of understanding the impact that they had,” says Elmahdi.

**“While we cannot change history, we can ensure that we are not perpetuating legacies we find abhorrent.”**

Joe Cain, a science historian at UCL, who took part in the Galton and Pearson discussions and is multiracial, feels that the best way forward is to make renewal a normal part of how institutions work.

Names that are now contested were put in place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Cain says. “It’s no surprise that, 100 years later, people are saying, let’s move on.” He suggests that institutions have regular reviews of their heritage, keep an inventory of the names that get used for buildings and renew them every decade or so. “There are far more people we want to honour than we have real estate for, so let’s just make some room.” That way, he says, those people whose names are displaced would not be seen as ‘losing’ any status. “To let one person dominate forever is too monotonous.”

There is no sign yet of the debate cooling. In late 2020, Oliver Dowden, then the UK culture secretary, threatened to cut the funding of museums that removed statues or artefacts associated with British colonialism. He warned

them of “the important cultural role you play for the entire country”, so that “as publicly funded bodies, you should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics”. In May 2021, Dowden blocked the reappointment of Royal Museums Greenwich trustee Aminul Hoque, after the multiculturalism specialist at Goldsmiths, University of London, had prominently called for decolonization of the university’s curriculum.

Such moves can seem calculated to inflame the arguments and generate more heat than light. But they don’t seem to reflect public opinion. A survey conducted by the analytics company YouGov in 2019, for example, showed that nearly 70% of the public supported teaching the role that the British Empire played in colonialism and historical injustice in the United Kingdom’s national curriculum. The country’s National Trust, in defence of efforts to address its historical links to colonialism and slavery at its historic properties across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, has said, “As a heritage charity, it’s our responsibility to make sure we are historically accurate and academically robust when we communicate about the places and collections in our care.”

Despite the noise made by ‘culture warriors’ with political agendas, reconsidering the legacies of racism and imperialism in UK science is thus about deepening the understanding of history, not denying it.

The best outcome, says Rutherford, would be not just to teach the valuable science of past thinkers, but also to confront the problematic aspects of their views and the legacies they created: to give the full picture. As Mitchell says, because previously the biases that motivated Huxley’s remarks “weren’t addressed at the source, they have led to repercussions that we are still feeling right now. The narrative needs to be rewritten.”

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