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Oxford's All Souls has shed its own by erasing Codrington name from library

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Having held out for many months, All Souls capitulated last week, erasing the name “Codrington” from its world-famous library.

Coming after the British Museum’s decision to “reposition” its bust of Sir Hans Sloane — placing in a rogue’s corner the sculpture of the wealthy 18th century naturalist and physician whose collection underpinned its founding — the move by Oxford’s most prestigious college was not unexpected.

But that doesn’t make it less troubling. After all, whatever one’s assessment of Christopher Codrington, he was scarcely the devil incarnate.

Dying in 1710 aged only 42, the third generation Barbados planter packed into his short life careers as a respected scholar, an outstanding soldier and a reforming governor of the Leeward Islands.

A deeply pious man, Codrington’s letters show that he was “mortified” at the condition of slaves in the West Indies and “shocked at the barbarous way in which they were treated”. He therefore sought during his governorship “to make the death penalty mandatory for killing a Negro or Indian”, and to ensure that slaves had access to Christian education.

Those aims precipitated a fierce clash with the West Indies' leading slave-owners who — in an episode which became a well-known precursor to the issues that beset the islands' demands for representative government in the 19th century — managed to end his appointment.

Undaunted by the planters' hostility, Codrington — as well as leaving to All Souls (of which he was a fellow) his magnificent library and a substantial financial donation — bequeathed his plantations to the recently established Society for the Propagation of the Christian Religion.

The society, his will specified, was required to establish a theological college in Barbados which would provide for the education of “three hundred Negroes at least” and “endear itself to the people (by) doing good to men's souls whilst taking care of their bodies”. Far from supporting slavery, the college helped prepare the ground for the great slave revolts of 1816.

None of that, however, made any difference to those clamouring for Codrington's posthumous shaming; nor was it even mentioned in the terse announcement by All Souls, which merely stated that his “wealth derived largely from his family's plantations (which were) worked by enslaved people of African descent”, as if it was the inheritance he had received, rather than his own character and achievements, which counted.

He was, in other words, condemned not for what he did but solely for who he was. To call that scandalous would be an understatement; unfortunately, the British Museum's denigration of its founding benefactor is every bit as disgraceful.

In effect, Hans Sloane's links to slavery were, at most, incidental: his wife's one-third interest in a plantation, which she obtained on the death of her first husband, provided some 7 per cent of Sloane's income. And even though those links certainly existed, no one could sensibly view them as the defining feature of Sloane's historical significance.

On the contrary, Sloane was not just a tireless philanthropist; as the only person to serve simultaneously as president of the Royal Society and of the Royal Society of Physicians, he played a vital role in the scientific revolution — a role the British Museum itself recognised in 2003 when it named its new Gallery of the Enlightenment in his honour.

To treat him as if he were no better than a perpetrator of unforgivable savageries is consequently absurd.

And to strip Codrington and Sloane of their renown is an injustice rendered all the more abhorrent by the fact that they are unable to defend themselves.

At least in part, that injustice reflects an age which no longer properly understands what it means to judge.

Long forgotten is Saint Augustine's warning that because there is inevitably "a darkness that attends the life of human society", those who sit "on the judge's bench" should be seized by the "fear and trembling" that comes from knowing that as we judge, so shall we be judged.

And long forgotten too is the importance, which Augustine stressed, of separating moral - discernment from moral condemnation, protecting judgment from the temptations of judgmentalism, and seeking to be righteous without descending into the idolatry of self-righteousness.

But it is not only a perverted form of moral absolutism that drives the inflamed militants who want the memories of these men, and of so many others, "cancelled".

Rather, it is a conscious political strategy that seeks to elevate slavery into the horror that - outweighs all of the past's other horrors, making even the slightest association with it the ultimate offence. And by thus positing the Atlantic slave trade as history's supreme evil, their goal is to paint the West and its civilisation as a hideous imposture whose foundations were incurably rotten from the start.

That strategy's success is apparent; yet it is hard to think of a greater distortion of historical reality.

To say that isn't to deny that slavery was monstrous; unquestionably, it was. However, it was not slavery which was remarkable: it had existed, often in even more horrific forms, for millennia. Rather, what was extraordinary — indeed, almost unbelievable — is that the

West, to its undying credit, abolished it.

As David Brion Davis, the pre-eminent historian of slavery, put it in concluding his magnificent trilogy, the emancipation of the slaves was “the greatest landmark of willed moral progress in history”. No economic imperative dictated it; no political pressures ensured its inevitability. But the West’s Judeo-Christian tradition unleashed a moral force which, for the first time, held out the promise of eliminating human bondage.

The tension between that moral force, with its regulative principles of reason, justice and mercy, and the world in which we live is not over and may not end until mankind ceases to inhabit the earth. But if its vitality dims it will not be because its message has become redundant; it will be because our confidence in the civilisation it generated, and which we received in trust, has faltered under the onslaught of slogan-mongers and pseudo-philosophers.

That is why the abject spinelessness of institutions such as All Souls and the British Museum matters. And that is why cowardly outrages such as those committed to Codrington and Sloane need to be exposed, regardless of how distant they may seem from the crises which dominate our day-to-day preoccupations.

Three centuries ago, Sloane and his collaborators spearheaded a campaign that led to the Witchcraft Act of 1735, which abolished the prosecution and punishment of witches in Great Britain. Now the witch hunts, show trials and summary executions are back. If their pyres are allowed to burst into flames, it is our culture, by far the richest of all inheritances, that will be reduced to dust and ashes.