



Britain's Imperial Past and Identity Q&A: History Masterclass 2023 teachers' notes

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Watch the Q&A here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbgmikGrM0g>

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Please note that all opinions are of the individual speaking and do not represent the views of Westminster Abbey. Questions in italics were asked by post-16 students.

Questions for discussion

Watch the recording of the question and answer session between Robin Whitburn and Abdul Mohamud of Justice to History and Lou Cash, Learning Officer at Westminster Abbey.

Question 1 – beginning at [00:03:16]

Are we trying to rewrite history by applying modern values to the past?

In his response, Robin Whitburn talks about historical questions versus contemporary questions. Thinking about this period of history, write a contemporary question that you would like to know the answer to, and then rewrite it as a historical question.

Question 2 – beginning at [00:10:55]

How significant was public opinion of Clive and Gordon?

Both speakers suggest that contemporary public opinion is influenced by the extent to which people follow the status quo. Do you agree and why?

Question 3 – beginning at [00:18:59]

Do you think that Gordon's positive personality traits make up for his arrogance?

According to Abdul Mohamud, history is much more complex than the search for heroes and villains. If this is the case, what do you think historians are searching for?

Question 4 – beginning at [00:25:10]

Could the East India Company have been successful without the support of people such as Mir Jafar?

What other factors were essential to the success of the East India Company?

Question 5 – beginning at [00:28:50]

'Britain's colonial administrators brought benefits to both Britain and the peoples they governed in the years 1890-1914'. How would you answer this past exam question?

Both speakers briefly set out how they would answer this past exam question. Create a structured plan for how you would respond to it and write your concluding paragraph in full.

Question 6 – beginning at [00:32:59]

Should church memorials be treated differently from memorials in non-religious settings?

Both speakers raise the point that physical location has an impact on how memorials are viewed. Abdul Mohamud suggests there is a difference between memorials viewed by 'people who are just going about their everyday business' compared to memorials 'within an enclosed space'. What other factors have an impact upon people's thoughts about memorials?

Transcript

Speakers:

Robin Whitburn and Abdul Mohamud of Justice to History

Chair:

Lou Cash, Learning Officer at Westminster Abbey

Introduction:

The Very Reverend Dr David Hoyle, Dean of Westminster

Lou Cash:

Hello, I'm Lou from Westminster Abbey. Thank you so much for joining this question and answer session which is a follow-on from the lecture that we hope you've already watched on Britain's Imperial Past and Identity with sort of special reference really to some of the monuments and memorials here at

Westminster Abbey. To introduce our special guest historians today, I'm going to hand over to the Dean of Westminster, the Very Reverend Dr David Hoyle.

David Hoyle:

Hello and good afternoon, and welcome to Westminster Abbey. It's always good to meet people interested in this extraordinary place and it is especially good to meet historians because in fact I'm a historian too. I've lectured and published in history. The Abbey is a working church - there are four services here every day - but it's also a gathering place, it's a convening space for a nation and for Commonwealth. It's now 17 days before the Coronation and that's the point at which all sorts of people will have their eyes on the Abbey to hear what we are going to try and say about monarchy, the state, and society. It's very difficult to talk about things like monarchy, state and society, and it's even more difficult when you have a particular history, because we're inviting people into a Christian space when they're not all Christians, and we're inviting people, as I well know, into an inheritance of Empire and colonialism. The Abbey is a really wonderful place, but it is awkward, and that's a living problem for us. Just before arriving here to talk to you, I've been in a long meeting all morning about our monuments and about the legacy of transatlantic slavery represented there. This is something we are talking about all the time and working hard to think through what we are going to do next as we try to tell our history better. So, it's a lively issue that you're engaging with today. You've heard from our two scholars already because you've heard their lecture. A quick introduction to Robin Whitburn, the lecturer in University College London, historian and someone who's spoken at conferences all over the world. Hello Robin.

Robin Whitburn:

Hello David. Lovely to be here.

David Hoyle:

We're also going to be joined by Abdul, who you saw on the lecture. He's, I think he's engaging with a couple of technical difficulties but he's well on his way and we have spoken to him already. So, I hope you're going to have a marvellous time, I hope you're going to enjoy your Q&A session. I'm going to hand you back to Lou.

Lou Cash:

Right, thank you so much David for the introductions to the guest lecturers today, that's great thank you. Right so our first question, we'll pose it to Robin since I think Abdul is just a little bit delayed.

Question 1 [0:03:16]

Lou Cash:

So, the first question then Robin for you is this: Are we trying to rewrite history by applying modern values to the past? The National Army Museum recently said history should not be viewed through today's lens, and that we should not be ashamed of our history. What are your thoughts?

Answer

Robin Whitburn:

Okay. So, perhaps a rather provocative answer to the question 'are we trying to rewrite history by applying modern values to the past', yes, of course we are, because that's what historians do. Historians construct interpretations that attempt to present the past following a set of principles and values. The idea of authenticity is a present-day value, it's a value that we hold, we think that our, that presentations of the past should be authentic. That's not necessarily how people have always thought about the presentation of the past. They will have said that the past should be serving a particular story. Perhaps it would serve a mythic, a mythology, perhaps it would serve a religious purpose, a political purpose. So, authenticity about history, which a lot of people say that's what we should be doing, that's a present-day value. Inclusivity is a present-day value that I think we want to apply as historians. Inclusivity means making sure that you're looking at the history of all the people of a particular place and a particular time. So, women existed in the 18th century. By focusing on 18th century women, maybe we're following a kind of feminist ethic about women's rights, but we're also being authentic because we know half the people in the 18th century were women. And so, the simple principle of authenticity means you want to include people that, at other times, have not been included. Sorry. We don't have to label the male figures of the 18th century as misogynists. I think they'll probably do that for themselves. I think when we look at what 18th century men are doing, they will probably come across as misogynists. We don't have to give them that label because maybe that label is a contemporary label, but nonetheless we still present what they're doing. We present what's there. Whether they should or should not have been doing that, that's not our business, but we present it all. And the point is that historians have not been very good at presenting it all. For the past centuries, they've been very good at presenting the world of men, they've been very good in this country in presenting the world of white men. Another angle, how did the British troops in West Africa react or treat the peoples, the Asante peoples of the area, that's a historical question. How did they, what did they do? If we want to start asking questions about should we be proud of what the British did in West Africa, frankly that's not a historical question. So that's not the job of a, that is a present-day question. I think the problem is that some people, and possibly the National Army Museum may be coming into this category, they want to ask present-day questions of the past instead of just sticking to historical questions. If they're presenting a history of the British army in West Africa in the 19th century and they're not paying any attention to what the army did to the indigenous people, then they're not presenting the past as it was. They're taking a particular view. If they're just presenting the amazing tactical and strategic actions of their troops, that's a very slanted view. And it's a slanted view coming out of present-day values. That's my view, I, at this point I would be turning to Abdul for his views on that. I think, I mean the other thing coming out of the lecture, you know, questions like how should we memorialise the East India

Company. That's not actually a historical question. Why did Lord Curzon campaign to memorialise Lord Clive in the early 20th century, that's a historical question, and a very important one. What was Curzon up to? Is it helpful to retain Clive's statue as a kind of, as an inspiration for the future, now that's a contemporary question, and I'd probably say no, it's not very helpful to do that. If you, if I was going to take down Clive's statue, I'd put it at Kedleston Hall, where you can go and you can look at Curzon and the family and you can see this is what, that's where we're looking at Curzon and what he was about. And really that statue of Clive is about, it's about Curzon. It's not about Clive, it's about Curzon. So, put it where it should be, put it where it's most helpful to tell the story that it tells. It doesn't tell us about Clive, it tells us about Curzon.

Lou Cash:

That's actually very interesting Robin in terms of the history of Westminster Abbey generally and thinking a little bit about how, you know, there are so many memorials in Westminster Abbey that I'm sure say much more about the person who placed the memorial there than it does about the person it's about if you see what I mean. I'm thinking of the big tomb that's in the Abbey for King Henry VII for example, but placed there by his son King Henry VIII, and I think that that tomb perhaps in the style of architecture around that tomb says more about Henry VIII's designs and his ideals than it does about, you know, his father. So that's interesting, you know, that idea of Curzon, what does the, you know, memorial to Clive actually tell us about Curzon, I think that's a really interesting idea isn't it, thank you Robin. Just for the benefit of our audience, I think that Abdul is with us, so hello Abdul but I'm sorry you're stuck as a participant, please feel free to use the chat box if you want to sort of join us in that way. So, Robin thank you, oh he's here. Amazing, you're here Abdul, thank you so much for joining us. Right, just in the nick of time, that's fantastic so great to see you, great to have you with us today as well. Okay well we won't let you off the hook then Abdul, let's go to you then with the next question. You're both going to I think have a go at the next question for me.

Question 2 [0:10:55]

Lou Cash:

But the next question is how significant was public opinion of Clive and Gordon? Well let's not be too mean actually, let's go to Robin first, and then let you warm up [...]

Abdul Mohamud:

No I'll start, I mean because then we can go back to Clive.

Lou Cash:

Oh you'll start okay. So how significant was public opinion of Clive and Gordon then, thank you Abdul.

Answer

Abdul Mohamud:

So I think that's one of, the issue that we have today around, I mean I caught quite a bit of what Robin's first answer involved, and it was about this sort of false representation of the past, this broader culture war, the wars over history and memorialisation of figures, etc. And one of the most helpful ways of challenging some of the sort of more pernicious or I could say sort of unhelpful aspects of discussing history, is by actually looking at what people at the time thought. And so the question, you know, what was the opinion of people like Gordon and Clive is an important one. Gordon was incredibly popular with people in Victorian Britain for lots of reasons, mainly because he epitomised the values of that age. He, you know, at a time when religion, you know, was, well at least people aspired to religious devotion, and also duty and service and martial valour, all of those things he represented them. And so, when we're talking about his significance in public opinion, it played a role in him, in his death, because it's the public opinion that drives, that sort of encourages, or at least forces the Prime Minister Gladstone to send him to Sudan, where he dies. The, a narrower public opinion of him, those in power, misused or appropriated his legacy in a sense, for ends that he might probably would have disagreed with, to present him as this martyr who died for the British Empire, who died for, you know, the expansion of, you know, a certain set of values which, you know, he probably didn't agree with. So yeah, he was an incredibly important figure and I think contrasts with Clive, I think, because, which I think Robin will talk about in that he was, he was much loved. Other people casted some, casted suspicion on him for his lifestyle, but I think he was, he was generally a well-loved figure.

Robin Whitburn:

Well Clive is a, public opinion on Clive again, very important in, in the building of his career and how he became so significant. As a young person, the kind of local public opinion was that he was a disgraceful little upstart, and they probably, you know, in his local area, when he was a young, as a teenager, he ran a protection racket, you know, he kind of, he was no good, and maybe that local opinion is what ended up getting him sent off to India to try his luck at a career in India. He emerges as a, as a military person, as somebody quite, quite prepared to get in amongst his, amongst the troops and to lead a charge against an enemy. And he has this mentor called Major Lawrence, who also has a memorial in the Abbey, we didn't get to talk about that in the lecture. As a result of this, he has this victory called the Battle of Arcot in 1751, and public opinion plays a very important role here because William Pitt, Earl of Chatham, who was a leading politician at the time, calls him a 'heaven-born general'. The guy is 26 and he's just led a small little skirmish in the southern part of India and he's getting called a 'heaven-born general'. I'm pretty sure it got to his, it went to his head, it naturally would, he's not even 30. He comes back around the age of 30, he's in London and he builds himself a little celebrity career, becoming, buying his way into Parliament as people did in those days. And he becomes somebody that the East India Company wants to send when there's trouble, wants to promote him, and public opinion played a part in doing that. And so

he goes, and then he gets caught up in the Bengal Revolution in 1756-57 which I'll talk about in another question in a moment, and he has another victory, but that victory is quite different and there's another question where all that'll be explained. And he now gets a massive fortune and when he gets his massive fortune and comes back to Britain, then public opinion starts to divide because he's now a very wealthy oligarch, if you like, he's one of a smaller number of people who are now very wealthy. And then you start to get some negative opinions coming out about him. And so public opinion of course plays a role in this, because he doesn't just stick to being a military or naval person. And that's the difference between him and the other two men of 1756-57 who have got their big monuments in the Abbey, Admiral Watson and Sir Eyre Coote. They just stuck, in that sense they kept to their lane, they kept to being dutiful military or naval servants. Clive just doesn't stick to his lane, he comes back, he wants to be part of the establishment, he wants to be a player in Parliament and so forth. And so, people get very perhaps jealous, suspicious, where's your money coming from and so on and so forth. Then he gets impeached by Parliament, or sorry not exactly impeached, but an inquiry, a parliamentary inquiry into his, into his affairs, which doesn't nail him for anything, doesn't exactly totally exonerate him, and maybe, you know, public opinion starts to kind of affect his name. We don't know why in the end he commits suicide. It's not absolutely clear the circumstances of his death. He had a pen knife, he's got a, a wound across his body that is the, what kills him, and it's his pen knife that does it. How some people still claim that he didn't actually commit suicide, I don't know. But it's pretty clear he did, and again, public opinion plays its role because Dr Johnson, Samuel Johnson of the famous dictionary, says "Clive had acquired his fortune by such crimes that his consciousness of them impelled him to cut his own throat". So, Johnson's very clear, he had to, he had to commit suicide because he was so corrupt. Who knows, but public opinion definitely played a big part.

Question 3 [0:18:59]

Lou Cash:

Many thanks to both of you, that's great. I'm going to direct the next question to Abdul if that's okay. And the question for you Abdul is, do you think that Gordon's positive personality traits make up for his arrogance? Was he a goody or a baddy?

Answer

Abdul Mohamud:

I mean, I like that question, it's because when I, you know, discussed sort of historical figures with young people, that was often what they wanted to find out, they wanted to know is it okay for me to admire this person or to sort of hold them up as a role model. Of course, history is much more complex than the search for, you know, heroes and villains and, but it's an entertaining question nonetheless and I think, in a way, he stands as an example of many of the things that the British Empire is, sort of, I suppose, lambasted for. He wasn't somebody in search of wealth, you know, he died completely poor, he eschewed wealth entirely. Whereas, you know, the Empire as a structure existed and was maintained through exploitation and the gathering of wealth through, you know, any means, you know, usually at the end of a sword or a rifle. And he seemed to, whilst also still being in the service of Empire, so he's a paradoxical

figure. He serves, you know, in China, for a tyrant, you know, the Qing Emperor is a tyrant, but it's in order to stop a rebellion which had claimed more lives, I think something like 60 million lives, it was the deadliest war of the 19th century, one of the deadliest wars in human history. I mean, he's commanding only 3,500 men in this, but he gains, you know, he feels like he has a mission to do good. When he's in Sudan, he has this same mission, again he's working under the umbrella of the British imperial structure, which is there to extract wealth in some shape or form from Sudan, certainly from Egypt. But he sees his job as, you know, creating a stable sort of system of governors, he even at one point says that the people should be given self-rule, and this is in the 1870s, and that sort of conversation for Africa certainly wouldn't, even for India hadn't I mean Indian National Congress hadn't been established for 15 years, so the idea of, you know, self-rule is something that he was talking about before people within the British Empire. But if we're going to judge him, it might be best to judge him by the words of one of his contemporaries, and if you'll let me just sort of whizz through it, Annie Besant who's a famous, you know, socialist, theosophist, you know, social reformer etc, wrote, in the year of his death, a book called *Gordon Judged Out of His Own Mouth*. And she wrote of him [...] in the first couple of passages: "He was a straightforward brave soldier of fortune, a sharp man of business with an eye to the main chance, by no means heroic and making no pretense to heroism, laughing rather at the humbug of friends at home who desired to guild his work with some thin coating of philanthropy and describing it honestly as hateful work that he was sick of, cruel and unjust to the highest degree, a man worthy neither of very high praise, nor of very severe blame, trying to do his duty to the tyrant who hired him while often disgusted with the acts entailed by that duty. Fearless, hot-tempered, variable, inconsistent, often violent and unjust, but on the whole endeavouring to do the best he could under conditions which rendered right action impossible". So, I think, the sentence carries on and it, each clause within it, what, the whole sentence [...] is a whole page, it contrasts with the other, and that's the figure he is. So, in answer to that question is he a goody or a baddy – who knows? Both.

Lou Cash:

Fair enough. Thank you, that's brilliant. I was going to ask you just to do me a thumbs up or thumbs down on him. Robin, are you thumbs up or thumbs down? Oh you're on mute Robin, he's just going to unmute I think yeah.

Robin Whitburn:

Sorry, yeah, was that to me?

Lou Cash:

Just a quick, are you thumbs up or thumbs down on Gordon?

Robin Whitburn:

Oh no you can't do that (Lou Cash: Oh can't I?). I mean, it's, no, I can't do that at all. You know, listening to what Abdul's been telling us, it's quite clear that he's much more complex than people, than was made out when I was, even when I was teaching about Gladstone in the, kind of about 30 years ago or so, you know, sort of, he gets, he's part of Gladstone's story, but I think his own story is much more interesting than we have given it credit for. I certainly think, in terms of should he be a person who students learn about, I'd give that a thumbs up (Lou Cash: Fantastic, yeah). I think, I think more, more authentic and rigorous learning about George Gordon is, would be good, definitely.

Lou Cash:

Fantastic, thank you, thank you both. I'm just conscious of time, we've only got about 12 minutes left and we've got at least four questions we want to ask, and by the way students watching, if you do want to pop something in the chat box, we will try to get onto it. We're a little bit pushed for time but we'll see what we can do.

Question 4 [0:25:10]

Lou Cash:

Right, so the next question Robin is for you. Could the East India Company have been successful without the support of people such as Mir Jafar?

Answer

Robin Whitburn:

No. Simple, straightforward answer. Absolutely not. There's no kind of, on the one hand, you know, they could've done it without, I mean, we're talking about an Indian Polity, you know, India at the time of 169 million people, say, in 1800, roughly, as best estimates. And we're talking about maybe thousands of clerks, an army largely of Indian soldiers, sepoys, of 200,000. And this is the kind of manpower or person-power that the Company had at its disposal is really small, so it gets its, it gets where it is by deals, by brokering deals with local people, that's how it starts. It's brokering deals, it's using local merchants, it's using local labour. When it wants to get into the political realm, it has to make use of, or it falls into, relationship with the people who have political power in the local area, like Mir Jafar. So, you know, this great, I've said we talk about Clive's victory at Plassey, regarded as this great establishment of British power in India. If you look at it from the Indian point of view, it's actually the British or the East India Company piggybacking on a local political revolution. The politics of Bengal were complex, they weren't simplistic, they were complex involving bankers, merchants, Mughal princes. There are significant people here, working in this field, and Clive hitches his little ambition and the Company's ambition to the people

involved in trying to plot against the ruler. And Plassey would not have, Clive wasn't even prepared to undertake the Battle of Plassey unless Mir Jafar, who was working for the Nawab at the time, unless this Mir Jafar guy was prepared to take some of the Nawab's troops and defect to the other side. Unless that defection was on the cards, Clive was going nowhere. Clive wasn't even going to march out into the field, and all the time in the kind of, William Dalrymple in his book *The Anarchy* tells this beautifully, in the kind of fortnight leading up to the battle, there are at least three maybe four letters sent by Clive to Mir Jafar saying, you are going to turn, you are going to come over to my side aren't you, where are you, where are you, you said you'd be here, where are you. I mean, it's kind of like, if there'd been, he'd had technology, I mean he'd be doing like 100 texts a day saying you told me you were coming, where are you, where are you. Clive needed, he was part of this conspiracy, and it's on the basis of that that the British start to build their, or the East India Company starts to build its political power. So, absolutely no question, they needed, they played their part, they hitched themselves to what was going on locally.

Question 5 [0:28:50]

Lou Cash:

Very short of time but we've got two more questions I definitely want you both to have a go at answering. I love this question because somebody has actually quoted from a past exam paper. So, the past exam question on a paper says: 'Britain's colonial administrators brought benefits to both Britain and the peoples they governed in the years 1890-1914'. And then the question to you both is, how would you answer this past exam question? You've only got a couple of minutes each.

Answer

Abdul Mohamad:

I would probably begin towards the end and just look particularly, I mean if we're going to think about a particular colonial administrator, I mean sometimes, you know, sort of, you know, just to focus on one, Kitchener, Lord Kitchener, was Commander-in-Chief of the Indian army in the early 20th century and he reorganises it, you know, raises 240,000 men, they are volunteers, they are paid for by the Indian taxpayer in that sense, but they are sent to garrisons in Singapore, Hong Kong, and then in the First World War in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). So, it benefitted Britain enormously because those hundreds of thousands of Indian soldiers were crucial. I mean, at the same time, the British army was, so whilst the Indian army was 240,000 I think in 1914, the Indian, sorry 247,000, the Indian army was only 7,000 men fewer. They were the same, sort of, in numbers. It benefitted Britain enormously, and Indians volunteered because they thought they were going to get independence out of it, and when they didn't, we see the rise of people like Gandhi. So clearly, these colonial administrators did not benefit the, their subjects, otherwise the independence movements of the early 20th century wouldn't have existed in the way they did.

Lou Cash:

Thanks Abdul. Anything to add to that Robin?

Robin Whitburn:

Just simply, you know, a British colonial administrator is going to serve the interests of Britain. That's their job. Their job description is, their job description will have been constructed on the basis of who they serve, and they serve Britain. So, the idea of a benefit, if there were such thing as a benefit, it would be through the eyes of the things that the British considered to be beneficial. So, in judging whether or not it was a benefit, it would unquestionably be to British advantage. If that, and we have in a sense, if you're saying something about a benefit, you're asking well what if it wasn't there. Well, we can say what if, if these things weren't there in terms of Britain, we might say well Britain wouldn't have an Empire, it wouldn't have so much trade. We can't be sure about, well if the area of Yoruba territory in current-day Nigeria, if the west, if the British administrators hadn't been there, we don't know what life exactly, what would life be like. We haven't bothered to ask, we haven't bothered to understand. The best example is the example of Jaja of Opobo, who was a kind of, a city state ruler in southeast Nigeria, and the colonial administrator Harry Johnston destroyed the man's life because he wanted to be sure that Britain took all the advantage of the economic palm oil trade, and Jaja wanted, wanted it to benefit the local people. Clear contest. And Johnston was out for Britain, out for his own interests and those of Britain.

Lou Cash:

Thank you, many thanks to you both for those answers.

Question 6 [0:32:59]

Lou Cash:

Okay, well we've got one final question then for both of you. Well let's go to you first Robin and then Abdul if you want to add anything at the end that would be great. So, the question is, and remembering that of course we're running this session from Westminster Abbey, which is a church, should church memorials, perhaps those attached to graves, be treated differently from memorials in non-religious settings in your view? And I think that this question sort of came from that idea that the Dean was talking about at the beginning, you know, how historic settings, churches, all sorts of places are now kind of rethinking interpretation of memorials and statues, so I think it's that sort of idea. So, should church memorials be treated differently from memorials in non-religious settings?

Answer

Robin Whitburn:

I think, I mean a simple answer would be to say yes, but I think to an extent, part of it connects with what does the memorial represent. So if, as in the case of some people in the Abbey, the memorial represents the resting place of that person, which we, which we tend in a lot of religions we think of the resting place as representing a spiritual aspect of a person's life as well as the material aspect of their lives. So just in your backdrop there Lou you've got the statue of William Shakespeare. We know that Shakespeare is not buried in Westminster Abbey, you know, his resting place is elsewhere. So, frankly, if that place was going to be, if we needed that space for a resting place for somebody of significance, I'd say yeah well let's put his statue somewhere else because it's a spiritual place and we have this idea of a resting place. But I actually was just, it's interesting, earlier today I was with a school and we're doing work there on the Match Women's Strike in the 1880s, and there was a woman in that strike called Sarah Chapman, and the local developers have wanted to demolish her grave. So, her grave is in east London and there have been threats to the graveyard and to her grave. Now, that, that should be respected, and the idea of a memorial at a resting place, now it may be that you want to move her resting place and give it some thought elsewhere, maybe Westminster Abbey, maybe we might move William Shakespeare's mere statue and put Sarah Chapman's resting place in Westminster Abbey. I'd like to see that.

Lou Cash:

Fantastic, thank you Robin. Anything to add to that Abdul?

Abdul Mohamud:

Very briefly I think there is a, the discussions around memorials that are, you know, peering down on the, you know, people who are just going about their everyday business like Edward Colston, and something inside an enclosed space, I think they're two very different discussions to be had because one is clearly a way of intimidating or enforcing an ideology on unsuspecting or, sort of, people who have not taken a conscious decision. The rest would be up to the people who are, you know, attending the church. If they feel offended by this particular statue, I'm sure there is a way of, you know, voting or whatever but it's their place of worship. And yeah, I think the two shouldn't be conflated.

Question 7 [0:36:42]

Lou Cash:

Thank you so much, that's great. We're going to wrap up in a second. Just because we've got viewers hopefully who are, you know, interested in studying history perhaps at university and beyond, do either of you have a, sort of a message for these students, perhaps along the lines of, you know, history, studying history generally, why do it, do you have any regrets, is it the best thing you ever decided to do in your lives? Just a quick sign-off from you both would be fantastic before we finish today. So, shall we go to you Abdul first?

Answer

Abdul Mohamud:

Yeah, it was the best decision I ever took. I mean I made many mistakes at the age of 18 but you know choosing history for university study was definitely not one of them. In terms of advice, I would obviously say read widely but when you're reading, know that there is no such thing as a neutral history. I missed part of the answer to that question that every historian is trying to influence you in some way. The historian E.H. Carr said that you need to listen to the buzzing in any historical text, and if you can't hear the buzzing, it's because you're not paying attention, it's not because it's not there. The buzz being that person's attempt to convince you to their point of view. And I think that's the joy in any historical study is yeah finding that buzzing and then being able to construct your own argument. So yeah, enjoy it, it's brilliant.

Lou Cash:

Thank you. Thanks so much. What about you Robin?

Robin Whitburn:

Yeah, I totally totally agree. And I think what's quite exciting about these kind of early decades [...] of the 21st century is that nobody, no kind of disgruntled or, kind of, jaded 17- or 18-year-old could any longer say that history doesn't matter, because actually the world has made pretty clear over the last decade that history matters. There were debates in the 1960s as to whether the subject would even survive in schools and education. It's so important and the way in which the debates are happening, hopefully, I mean, debates about history go on and sometimes you feel like you're in a revolving door where you're just coming round, the same thing's coming round again. I think in the last few years we've stepped out from the revolving door to a new place, to a new place where people take history quite seriously and are not prepared to see it hijacked by, as Abdul said, like the culture warriors who just want, who want to wave flags and whatever. A desire for real authentic, inclusive history might be a way to more inclusive living, because that's what we want to do, we want to have more inclusive lives.

Lou Cash:

Thank you, thank you both. Thank you so much for joining us today. So, thank you very much to Abdul Mohamud and Dr Robin Whitburn. They're Justice to History, so I'm sure you can go and find out more about them if you haven't come across these two wonderful historians before now. Thank you very much to you, the audience. We really encourage you to come and visit us in person at Westminster Abbey. We

will be looking out for you and we hope you come and see us soon. Thank you very much and best of luck with your studies.

Biographies of speakers

Dr Robin Whitburn

Robin Whitburn is a Lecturer in History Education at the University College London - Institute of Education. He is a Fellow of the Historical Association (HA) in the UK, and has spoken at national and international conferences in North America, China, South Africa and Europe. Robin has 30 years' experience in London high schools in a range of roles including Curriculum Deputy Headteacher and Advanced Skills Teacher in history.

Abdul Mohamud

Abdul is currently a doctoral research fellow at University College London, working with a new project on the teaching of Empire, Migration and Identity. He has 14 years' experience working in schools in London and overseas as well as three years' experience working in Initial Teacher Education at UCL. Abdul has authored a range of school history textbooks on diverse histories and has co-authored a range of academic articles.

Robin and Abdul founded Justice to History as an organisation to help teachers and students explore relevant, and often neglected, diverse histories. They recently led an HA Teacher Fellowship programme on Britain and Transatlantic Slavery and presented a series of webinars for the HA on Diverse Histories and Decolonising the Curriculum.

Context of the event

Westminster Abbey's Learning Department hosted the online event 'Britain's Imperial past and identity' on 19th April 2023. Dr Robin Whitburn and Abdul Mohamud discussed what the monuments of Westminster Abbey can teach us about Britain's Imperial past in a pre-recorded lecture that students were able to watch and submit questions before the live event. Lou Cash, Learning Officer at Westminster Abbey chaired a live question and answer session with Robin and Abdul, during which students' questions were answered.

Links to exam board specifications:

AQA The British Empire, c1857–1967

Edexcel Britain: losing and gaining an empire, 1763-1914

OCR From Colonialism to Independence: The British Empire 1857–1965

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