Westminster Abbey
Learning

Britain's Imperial Past and Identity lecture: History Masterclass 2023 teachers' notes

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Follow-up discussion questions

After watching this lecture, your students could debate one of these questions verbally or provide a written response for homework.

- What were the key factors that enabled the East India Company to become more than just traders and merchants?
- Beyond 'valour' and 'prudent conduct', what leadership qualities were admired in the 18th and 19th centuries?
- Abdul Mohamud describes the British Empire as a 'very complex interconnected web of enterprises'. How far do you agree with his interpretation?
- Robin Whitburn describes how imperial success 'gives an opportunity for people who are not high ranked in society to actually move up'. How typical is the Enderby family's experience of social mobility in the British Empire during the 18th and 19th centuries?
- Abdul Mohamud describes General Gordon as 'a sort of agent of God'. To what extent were the two great forces of Empire and Evangelicalism in the 18th and 19th centuries interlinked?
- Curzon played a significant role in transforming Clive's poor reputation into that of a hero at the start of the 20th century. What other factors helped Clive's cause at this time?

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Transcript

Robin Whitburn:
So welcome to our A-Level History Masterclass 2023, presented to you by Westminster Abbey in collaboration with ourselves Justice to History. My name is Robin Whitburn, history teacher for many many years in schools, now working for University College London Institute of Education, training history teachers, as well as being in partnership with my colleague here in our Justice to History organisation.

Abdul Mohamud:
Hello everyone, my name is Abdul Mohamud. I was also a history teacher until very recently last year for many years. I'm currently a full-time PhD student at the University College London, working on a project, a new project focusing on the understanding of migration, Empire and identity on British history, and British history teaching in particular.

Robin Whitburn:
So our, our topic today connects very much with our work over the last ten years and Abdul's doctoral studies. It's on Britain's Imperial Past and Identity 1760-1920. But we want to do it through the lens of the Abbey. So our enquiry question for this Masterclass is 'What can the monuments of Westminster Abbey teach us about Britain's Imperial past from 1760 to 1920?'. The topic of monuments and memorials has actually been in the public eye in a way, perhaps, almost, never before. Since 2020, there have been so many stories about controversy over particular statues. The famous one of Edward Colston in the middle there, in the middle of our Covid lockdown. People throwing the Colston statue into the waters in Bristol. But there have been other ones, haven't there?

Abdul Mohamud:
The famous sort of flash point when it comes to statues is obviously the statue of Winston Churchill in Whitehall for a variety of reasons. But going back before 2020, it was Cecil Rhodes' statue in Oxford, which was part of a, sort of, international movement against, sort of, colonial figures which started in Cape Town, the giant statue of Rhodes there where he was the Prime Minister of the Cape colony. But the one that we're going to be really focusing on today, and the focus of our talk, is the statue, or the memorialisation in general, of figures like Robert Clive, 'Clive of India'. You can see his, sort of, giant statue there in Westminster. But we're going to be focusing in on the history of these memorials. There's an assumption that, because they are old and cast in bronze and look like they've been there for centuries, that's not always been the case and their origins are actually a lot more complex and interesting than first appears.

Robin Whitburn:
But let's go to the Abbey. And we heartily do recommend that you do that physically rather than remotely. If you can get down to Westminster Abbey, there's nothing like seeing these memorials in their context. Two of the memorials we're going to be looking at are here in this early 19th century picture of the Abbey. But the academic Holger Hoock, he's working in the University of Pittsburgh, he describes the Abbey in this way: a collection of 'great men' - it is largely men, there are women memorialised in the Abbey and certainly buried there, but there are very few big monuments to great women other than queens. But it's 'a collection of 'great men' of a society or nation, and the physical site of their representation... a potent manifestation of the national monument, which seeks to perpetuate a moment in a nation's history, an event, person or group of persons, and thus to encapsulate national identity in a permanent symbol'. One

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of the figures that you might expect to see in Westminster Abbey in that way would be Admiral Horatio Nelson, as at the top of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. And certainly Nelson himself had a sense, perhaps inflated, but he was a very famous Admiral, of this sense in which he would be himself memorialised. In 1798, he was preparing to fight the French at the Battle of the Nile and it's alleged that before, the night before the battle, he said: "Before this time to-morrow, I shall have gained a peerage, or Westminster Abbey". I'll either be alive and called Lord Nelson, or I'll be dead and get my statue in the Abbey. Now in the end, he didn't end up having a memorial in Westminster Abbey.

Abdul Mohamud:
He does get the peerage though.

Robin Whitburn:
He did get the peerage because he won the battle, absolutely. He did, he is Lord Nelson. But there was a feeling that the Abbey had just become too crowded by the end of the 18th century, and there were debates in Parliament even, a special report, an investigation into memorials in the Abbey. And they got this beautiful new cathedral, St Paul's in London, and they thought this is almost an empty space, let's use this as some kind of pantheon of the great heroes, the future heroes of the country. And so, when Nelson does die at the Battle of Trafalgar, his mausoleum is in St Paul's Cathedral, as is Wellington's after the Battle of Waterloo. The Abbey decides, well we can't not recognise him in any way, and so they actually made a waxwork of him. So, they had a waxwork figure of him dressed in his Admiral's gear, and you can still see that in the Abbey Museum if you visit today.

Abdul Mohamud:
Not quite sure it's up to Madame Tussauds standards but it's a historical artefact.

Robin Whitburn:
It's a historical artefact. But if we go to the Abbey then, the best thing we could do, is to just give you a little clip of a part of the Abbey. This is in the north transept, and these are the two monuments that we're going to start with today. We can see them in this short video film. The first one is that one there. Look at it, right up, not on eye level down here. You have to look up into the Gothic rafters almost, to see this monument and the other one is close by. So, there we go. From the top monument just round by the side and here's the second one. So, two really vast monuments. And these two Abbey monuments […]

Abdul Mohamud:
That's right, you do have to see them really to appreciate the scale of these monuments. You know, you are craning your neck to see the very top.

Robin Whitburn:
And you would think, wouldn't you, that surely these must be, these people must be as famous as Nelson, surely these are national figures. The two Abbey monuments suggest glorious sacrifice for your country, for the honour of Great Britain, and they are! But they were actually erected not by the nation, but by a business. The business that paid for these monuments was the East India Company and they directly deal with the Abbey. And they pay Westminster Abbey to actually have these monuments put up, within the space I think of about just around 30 years, within a space between the late 1750s and the late 1780s. The Company pays for these two monuments.

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Abdul Mohamud:
I don't know about you Robin. But it does seem, that relationship does seem very unusual, to sort of a non-historian or a modern listener, that a company would have such a close relationship with, you know, the sort of sacred place in a country. How is that?

Robin Whitburn:
It's come about because the East India Company, from its origin at the beginning of the 17th century, in the early 1600s, where it is really just a trading company. Over the course of that century, it establishes itself in India. It ends up with three bases: one in Madras, another in what is now Mumbai, and Madras is now Chennai. So in modern day Chennai and Mumbai they have their base. And then the final base that turns out to be their kind of capital, their focus point, is in modern day Kolkata, or in those days they called it Calcutta. And so, the East India Company has three strategic points in India, and from there, it starts to build and build and become identified with the British Empire. Most of the focus of the British Empire in the 18th century is on North America, it's on the colonies, the 13 colonies, and on the colonies of the West Indies where the sugar plantations are, and the trade in enslaved Africans that's going across the Atlantic. Those are the big aspects of Empire. But developing over in the East is this company that is really dealing directly with the Indian Mughal Empire, so its transactions are direct with the Mughal rulers of India.

Abdul Mohamud:
But its fortunes are very closely tied to the fortunes of the British Empire, and so the line between company and state is very blurry.

Robin Whitburn:
Because I think as the Company becomes so much bigger, so Britain wants to actually identify with this as part of Britishness. And when these monuments are put up, you can see that it says here, that the East India Company has put this one up 'as a grateful testimony of the signal advantages which they obtained by his valour and prudent conduct'. So, they're still, although it's in Britain's national mausoleum, it's still talking about the advantages that they had, which meant we've paid for this because we were so grateful. So, what did these two people do and who were they? Well one was Charles Watson, his monument's up there, that's the one high up in the Abbey. And the other is Sir Eyre Coote, and that's his monument there just alongside Charles Watson. And they're involved in what we know as the Plassey campaign, the Battle of Plassey, but in India, they would call it the Bengal Revolution of 1757. So, the East India Company and the Bengal Revolution seen through these two monuments. So first of all, Charles. What was happening in Bengal? What's happening in Calcutta? Well, the Nawab of Bengal, the Mughal ruler of Bengal, Siraj ud-Daulah, he came to the Nawabship in 1756.

Abdul Mohamud:
Which just sort of means prince, doesn't it? He's not the Mughal Emperor but he's a deputy in a sense.

Robin Whitburn:
Yes, he's a governor, he's like the governor of Bengal. But in taking that position, he starts to challenge this idea that the Company should be such a huge powerful figure. They are merchants, he says, well, in terms of, because they've started to build fortifications in Kolkata, they've built a fort for themselves, Fort William. And he says: 'What use do you have of a fort when you're merchants? Why do you need a fort?

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You're traders. Do your trading'. And he wants them to actually demolish the fort, he wants them to start behaving more strictly according to the rules that had been laid down in the 17th century.

Abdul Mohamud:
I think it was Simon Schama who said, it was at that point, that the Nawab realised that he had a cuckoo in the nest. It was almost by, yeah, they'd sort of stealthily fortified their position and he had to take action.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah. And the governor, the East India Company Governor of Calcutta, a man called Drake, he decides, we're not going to pay any attention to this, we're not going to listen to this Nawab. Who the hell does he think he is? Doesn't he know that we're British? And he refuses to give any concessions, so the Nawab attacks Calcutta. He takes and captures Calcutta, and as a result of this, the British now of course are indignant, an incident happens during the occupation, during the Nawab's restoration in Calcutta, where a number, overnight, a number of English prisoners are held in a very small cell in Calcutta.

Abdul Mohamud:
About 160 or so I think.

Robin Whitburn:
Allegedly. It's much more likely to be in double figures than triple figures. It's probably, we think it probably now is more like sort of 70 to 80. But there are a number of people held in this cell overnight. It's almost certainly not on the orders of the Nawab, it's probably one of those kind of errors, nobody bothered to check, no one did a risk assessment. They just bunged all these folk into this cell. And as a result of the claustrophobic conditions and the unsanitary conditions of this, they die. Most of them die as a result. And it's a big scandal, it gets called The Black Hole of Calcutta. And in retrospect, it gets used as the justification for what happens next. So, nobody knows the full details of all of this over in Britain, but before they know all of that, they order British forces to go back to Calcutta and retake Calcutta, and that's where Watson comes in. Because Watson was a naval commander, he's commanding the British ships, perhaps half a dozen of them at most, in Madras in the south. And along with Watson, the naval commander, is Colonel Clive, who's the military commander. So, he has the troops, Company troops, East India Company troops, and Watson has the ships, Royal Navy ships. And Watson carries Clive's troops up the coast, up across the Indian Ocean to Kolkata and they arrive there in January 1757. And largely down to Watson's efforts, they recapture Calcutta under his bombardment. He's promoted then to Vice-Admiral of the White. But later that year he died of tropical disease.

Abdul Mohamud:
It's not uncommon for well many people in Southeast Asia at that time, but particularly Europeans who were unfamiliar with the sort of climate.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah. And as a result of that, almost instantly, the Company put up this great memorial to Watson in Westminster Abbey. And here you can see on that memorial, the figure of Calcutta, it's a very sort of ambiguous figure in that it looks like a kind of classical Greek figure, but it could be draped in Eastern costume. It's got kind of possibly an Eastern necklace, but this figure represents the freeing of Calcutta,

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could well be an allusion at this stage, to those who died in the Black Hole because there were some women and children involved in that. And in contrast to that figure, which is what Watson's looking towards, that figure, he's turned his back on the figure of an Indian, of an indigenous person, who's shown as a kind of evil person that needs to be chained and subdued. And that's the monument to Watson. The monument to Coote alongside, that celebrates a military person. So Coote is a military officer, and he's there in the Bengal Revolution, he's there in the campaign, but he's a junior officer. So, Watson was under Clive, so Robert Clive is the leader and Coote is a junior officer. But on the night before this Battle of Plassey which happens after Calcutta is released, is freed from the Nawab's control and the Company are restored. After the Company is restored, Clive decides the British are going to go and actually fight the Nawab. So rather than just simply recapture their own territory, they're going to go after the Nawab, and that's what the Battle of Plassey is, a battle between British forces and the Nawab of Bengal. And just before the battle, on the night before, Clive, the commander, and the majority of his officers were against fighting the battle the next day. But Coote, Eyre Coote, at that point, I think he is Major Eyre Coote on the eve of Plassey, he decides 'No, we should fight. We must fight.' And he argues, he argues with Clive, and in the end overnight Clive changes his mind. And there is the Battle of Plassey and the British win. Later on, Coote was sent down south to Madras, he beats the French who are now fighting the British in India as part of the Seven Years War. And he wins at the Battle of Wandiwash in 1760. In India he becomes known as 'Coote Bahadur'. So 'bahadur', a word, an Indian word for hero, and so that's his nickname because of his success. And in the 1780s he has more military success. At that stage, the East India Company are fighting Hyder Ali and the French. Hyder Ali was the ruler of Mysore in the south and Coote has several victories against Ali. But in 1783, before that war was actually finished, Coote dies of a stroke. And again, the East India Company decide to memorialise him in Westminster Abbey. There's another, there's a figure of an indigenous Indian person again, hiding his face in shame at the glorious military might of Sir Eyre Coote, whose face is on this plaque that is raised up by the Angel of Victory. And there's this strange figure in the middle of this helmet.

Abdul Mohamud:
I mean it's a ghostly sort of […]

Robin Whitburn:
It's ghostly, it has no real, the head is not a real head, it's just like a stump inside.

Abdul Mohamud:
Yeah, and almost sort of like a Viking or Saxon style helmet, you know, alongside this classical robe, which is interesting.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, it's kind of suggesting a continuity almost, isn't it, of kind of English greatness from the warriors of old through to Eyre Coote, the warrior of the 18th century. And so, there are a number of key things, that these two monuments are celebrating, and the monument to Watson uses these two words, 'valour', our two terms 'valour' and 'prudent conduct'. There's 'valour' in defeating a pernicious enemy, they could be French, they could be Indian, but there's this 'valour' in defeating the evil enemy. There's also 'valour' in liberating oppressed people along with that kind of mighty victory, there's always a kind of righteousness it seems in the way the British tried to portray themselves. And that 'valour' in liberating oppressed people, usually white British people.

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Abdul Mohamud:
Usually women.

Robin Whitburn:
And often they're very usually (Abdul Mohamud: Portrayed as women) portrayed as women in these kinds of memorials. But also, it's the way that they do this, they are brave and courageous, they have so much valour. But these men, Watson and Coote, they do it with prudent conduct. They're wise and prudent in the way they go about things, suggesting a kind of morality. They're prudent in securing advantages for a British company. They’re also prudent in avoiding scandal and excessive self-advancement. I mean this is what the British […]

Abdul Mohamud:
Which would not be good for shareholders.

Robin Whitburn:
No.

Abdul Mohamud:
And the later Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings, is impeached for imprudent conduct, allegedly. So this idea that they are prudent is something that the Company wants to lionise, or at least you know, recognise.

Robin Whitburn:
And so here we have in the nation’s mausoleum, we have two major monuments to people who are directly involved in carving out what will become the British Empire in India.

Abdul Mohamud:
[It] sounds like you're concluding without having shown us the memorial in Westminster Abbey to Clive of India, the great hero of the Battle of Plassey.

Robin Whitburn:
So what about Robert Clive, yeah, fearless hero of Plassey? There was no monument in the Abbey from the East India Company for Clive.

Abdul Mohamud:
But there was for his juniors.

Robin Whitburn:
There's one for a junior officer, there's one for the naval commander, but there's none for him. We have a view as to why that would be, why would Clive not get his monument? Part of I think that lies in the nature of the Bengal Revolution. It's presented in history as this great British military victory against a corrupt Indian ruler. It's actually the result of an Indian conspiracy to remove their own ruler. That wasn't unprecedented. Bengal revolutions had actually happened several times in the 18th century where some of the Indian merchants and leading figures, Indian nobles, came to the conclusion that their Nawab was

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unscrupulous, wasn't ruling in their favour. They would replace them, they would depose them, and that’s what […]

Abdul Mohamud:
Probably worth giving some context at this point as to what's happening in India very briefly. In the late 17th century, India was a highly centralised state ruled from Delhi by the Mughal Emperor, for a large part of that, Aurangzeb. And on his death, the centralised authority starts to fragment. There is a nominal Mughal Emperor based in Delhi, but his power is weaker and weaker, and that gives the opportunity for local businessmen or sort of ambitious military men to impose themselves in the richest provinces such as Bengal.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, one of the richest. And if you're interested, obviously if people are interested in reading more, William Dalrymple's book *The Anarchy* covers all of this period. An excellent read. So, what's going on in 1757 is something that concerns Indian establishment. On the merchant side, you have Jagat Seth, the banker, and you have Amir Chand, nicknamed Omichand, the merchant. And they conspire with one of the local nobles Mir Jafar, to basically replace Siraj ud-Daulah, the ruler, the Nawab of Bengal. To replace Siraj with Mir Jafar, that's what they're about. And they ask Clive to get involved because obviously they know, they realise ‘hey we've got some British forces here on our doorstep’. Clive was about to go back to Madras. After relieving Calcutta, he was going to head back down to Madras. They ask him to get involved through a number of backdoor deals. At one stage Clive actually forges Admiral Watson's signature on a document because he's trying to do a deal and he realises Watson wouldn't be, probably not be part of it. So, these kinds of shenanigans are going on, that's what lies behind the Battle of Plassey. And in fact the real coup de grâce that sinks Siraj ud-Daulah at Plassey isn't Clive or Eyre Coote’s military acumen, it's the fact that Mir Jafar was Siraj’s right-hand guy, and so, in the middle of the battle, Mir Jafar takes all of his troops over to the British side and of course Siraj is done for, he can't possibly win when half of his army’s gone over to the other side.

Abdul Mohamud:
And the other half forgot to cover their gunpowder stores when it started raining.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, when it rains, yeah, the monsoon. And Clive happens to be, is in a mango grove, isn't it I think, which kind of protects them. So, what happens next kind of also dents Clive's reputation, because Clive, despite having been reluctantly kind of pushed into this by Eyre Coote, part of a conspiracy, he's the one who emerges a) with the reputation as you said of Plassey, but also with a massive fortune.

Abdul Mohamud:
I think overnight he becomes one of, if not the richest individual in Britain, and I mean understandably this attracts a bit of jealousy but also genuine I think anger at the sort of scale of his greed, and so he's being interrogated by some sort of parliamentary committee that's saying you know, ‘how on earth could you ruin the name of the British Army and British people by sacking the city in this way’. And his response […]

Robin Whitburn:

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Yeah. It's sort of, yeah, I was just going to say that, he doesn't hang about much in India, what he really wants is to come back and be an upper-class person in Britain. And there were a number of these folk who did that from the Company, so, having, because you know they go as a company, they don't go as settlers to settle in India, they're basically doing business and he's no different.

Abdul Mohamud:
No, they're not paid a great deal and the lure, the real attraction, for people who joined the Company was in the promise of being able to work as interlopers, do side deals for themselves, or to you know, just to make little profits where they could. The most famous one was the grandfather of William Pitt, the Prime Minister, or the father, Thomas Pitt, Diamond Pitt, who's named that because he steals a massive diamond and brings it back. But yes, Clive when he's questioned about his looting, said: 'An opulent city lay at my mercy; vaults were thrown open to me alone, piled on either hand with gold and jewels. At this moment, I stand astonished at my own moderation.' Which is one of the, I think all-time great quotes in one's own defence.

Robin Whitburn:
Yes, well, we've kind of, we're kind of used to people being interrogated by parliamentary committees and being, making kind of smart remarks.

Abdul Mohamud:
Or shameless remarks.

Robin Whitburn:
Or shameless remarks possibly, we couldn't possibly comment. So Clive ends up, in fact, although he is fabulously rich and he has vast estates, and he gets a peerage, although they don't give him a British peerage like he might have wanted, they give him an Irish peerage, and so he is Baron Clive, but he is, his is an Irish peerage. And he had a history of mental illness of getting depression, from when he was a young person in India, in fact when he first goes out. And he also, from what we can understand, had an illegal drug habit in opium, and he ends up committing suicide in 1774. And so even though he was acquitted of corruption by the parliamentary investigation, still a deeply divisive figure in the country. And the East India Company decided not to put up a monument and they don't request a monument in Westminster Abbey. But he's going to get a monument later. Meanwhile elsewhere, there is still imperial business going on and this is an interesting family.

Abdul Mohamud:
For the British Empire by the late 18th and 19th century, was, you know, vast and, you know, a very complex interconnected web of enterprises. And one family that sort of epitomised that, the Enderby family, were involved in a number of businesses, such as the tea trade shipping tea from China and later India to markets in Europe and North America. But also in whaling, which is now illegal, rightly so, but was incredibly common in the 1800s. Whale oil, or the fat from the whales, were used to lubricate the fine machinery that was, you know, potentially the engine of the Industrial Revolution and was used for other things like textile manufacture. And they were involved in these businesses and accidentally in the course of their whaling also ended up discovering an island here or there, so they really do epitomise empire, you know, discovery of territory and also this sort of obsession with trade.

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Robin Whitburn:
But not on the kind of, not on the level of the State. This is just, I mean, a family business.

Abdul Mohamud:
Absolutely. When Napoleon Bonaparte said that Britain was a nation of shopkeepers, you know, I think he was thinking of people like the Enderby family.

Robin Whitburn:
Like the Enderbys.

Abdul Mohamud:
Absolutely.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah so their base is in south east London. They're out of kind of Gravesend, Deptford, Bermondsey, and that's their neck of the woods. They are involved in, they get involved in some kind of illustrious aspects of British Empire history, understand that one of their, one of their ships, one of their tea trading ships, was possibly one of the three or four that was involved in the Boston Tea Party.

Abdul Mohamud:
Yeah, so as I said they were involved in the, I mean this is, you know, we're not entirely certain because that suggests scale of their operation. But one of their ships was probably boarded by the Sons of Liberty, the American Patriots, who you know dress up as Native Americans, get on the ships and then throw the tea overboard which is seen as really the starter gun to the American War of Independence. So it's one of their ships was involved in that. But I mean they would have fallen, I mean they wouldn't have been on this PowerPoint had it not been for one of the daughters.

Robin Whitburn:
But I also mentioned, they're also involved in, the whaling takes them to Australia. So they span the globe on what is a fairly medium-scale operation but they do span the globe and that, you're in the, by the 19th century you are getting the sense that British interests do span the globe, not just, not just coming out of Westminster and Parliament, but actually interests from a local firm in south east London are spanning the globe.

Abdul Mohamud:
Absolutely.

Robin Whitburn:
The Enderbys don't end up in Westminster Abbey. There's no monument to any of these.

Abdul Mohamud:
But one of their sort of descendants is. And so, not from the male line, one of the sort of the daughters of Samuel Enderby Jr I think it was.

Robin Whitburn:

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Yes Samuel Enderby, Samuel Jr is there, that's his picture here in the middle.

Abdul Mohamud:
It's his daughter who then marries a British Army Officer, and […].

Robin Whitburn:
That's one of the other things of the imperial success, is that it gives an opportunity for kind of people who are not high ranked in society to actually move up. That's been throughout the Empire's history, hasn't it. And because Samuel Sr, who's kind of in the middle of the, starts all this business in the mid-18th century, he was an apprentice to a barrel maker. He comes from the humblest of beginnings, but by the, his granddaughter is marrying an Army General.

Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn:
And their son.

Abdul Mohamud:
By the late 19th century, I've read it in various sort of places, probably the most famous man in the world, and his name was Charles George Gordon, as you would expect for someone who's, you know, recognised by some as the most famous man on Earth, he has a number of names and titles. And if you sort of zoom in, so this is his actual […]

Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn:
This is his memorial in the Abbey.

Robin Whitburn:
But this is not his place of burial is it. Because like Nelson, he's buried in St Paul's Cathedral. And I think, I think I'm right in saying that his memorial in St Paul's is actually greater than Nelson's, isn't it?

Abdul Mohamud:
It's one of the most enormous memorials you're likely to see. I mean I've been to Paris to see the tomb of Napoleon, now that is bigger than this one, but not by much. Which really says something to the, I mean certainly the public affection for Gordon, but also the necessity to sort of recognise his achievements, you know he had an outsized role in the British self-imagination.

Robin Whitburn:
And unlike Nelson who only gets a waxwork in Westminster Abbey, Gordon actually gets an actual monument, a metal bronze bust, and this is just inside the West Door, a stone's throw from the unknown, the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior.

Abdul Mohamud:
It'd be easy to miss, but once you see it, it is actually quite, yeah very detailed […].

Robin Whitburn:
It was at a time when they decided that they weren't going to have any of these because there was no space. But they kind of made space for George, for Charles George Gordon.

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Abdul Mohamud:
Yeah, and his sort of life is really encapsulated in these ribbons around, the sort of, the coat of arms or the shield beneath his bust. On the left you can see there it says Mandarin of China, which essentially means sort of employee of the Chinese Emperor, you know that's a term for Mandarin, a civil servant, but he worked directly for the Qing Emperor of China in the 1860s. On the right you can see it says Pasha of Egypt. Now Pasha is a sort of another name for governor, it's a Turkish title that was used for the governors of the provinces of the Ottoman Empire. And at that time in 1873 when he was acting as the sort of Pasha of Egypt, he was essentially doing the work of a governor first in Egypt and then later in Sudan, where he gets his lasting title, Gordon of Khartoum. And finally, across the bottom, his day job, the job that gave him prominence, a Major General of the British Army. So, he first sees action in the Crimea which is a war between Britain, France and the Ottoman Empire against Imperial Russia. He then desperately tries to get a commission to India in 1857, because he, the Great Rebellion has begun and he wants to be a part of that. But he's not chosen for it, and so he sort of skulks around and three years later finds himself in China, just after the end of the Second Opium War. But he's there for, perhaps the most defining episode of the Second Opium War, which is the looting and sacking of the Summer Palace, which was the residence of the Qing Emperor, where pretty much everything, even things that were bolted down, were taken away and shipped to different parts of the world - 1.3 million different items and artefacts taken from the Summer Palace before it was burnt to the ground. And he famously disagrees with this and that's a sign of the character that will endear him to the British public.

Robin Whitburn:
So a bit different from Clive then.

Abdul Mohamud:
The exact opposite of Clive. Where Clive was essentially faithless, he was at this, Gordon was a man of deep deep faith. Where Clive was motivated by fame, in fact most famously someone said of Gordon he was without the three vices that corrupt men, and that is the love of money, the love of fame, and the love of women. So he never married, he hated money and he could not stand being famous, with the irony of course being, as a result of his hatred of fame, he does things that make him fame-worthy which makes him quite miserable. But you can see him there on the right dressed in the imperial yellow jacket, which is […]

Robin Whitburn:
Oh my gosh that's actually him, I thought that was the Chinese leader, okay.

Abdul Mohamud:
No that is Gordon, with a moustache, he's lost a little bit of weight from the photo on the right there from the Crimea. But anyway, he’s leading sort of a ragtag. This is, so the Chinese, the Imperial Chinese government is losing grip on its country at this point. They've lost two wars to the Europeans, and they've given away ports, this makes a lot of people in China angry. And there are a group of people in China called the Taipings led by a sort of messianic leader, who says he's the second coming of Christ. The British and the Americans, everyone has to decide are these really Christians or not, and they decide well no they're not Christians, so they put their weight behind the Chinese Emperor. So, the Chinese Imperial army is led by an American commander. Gordon is given command of a smaller force called the Ever Victorious Army. And he whips them into shape, you know, forbids them from looting, you know, drills them and makes

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sure that they are sort of efficient and they win quite a few battles. He gains the everlasting gratitude of the Qing Emperor, but there was one episode that really defined him, where he was about to take a city being held by the Taipings, he negotiates with their leader and says: ‘if you surrender to me, I guarantee the safety of your men, each and every one of them.’ And they surrender but the Imperial Chinese Army are the ones to take the city and they do not honour that, and they execute all of the prisoners. And he resigns in disgust at this and he says: ‘I cannot work under these conditions’, etc.

Robin Whitburn:
So, this wasn't an exercise in boosting British imperial power, this was a British officer, along with Americans as well, supporting the, an overseas Empire.

Abdul Mohamud:
Yes, he is in a way, he's not going against British foreign policy, British foreign policy is to support the Imperial Chinese government because they are the ones who are seen as the best bet for maintaining British trade. And yeah, when Gordon tries to sort of resign, they offer him huge amounts of money and titles, and you know, he turns them all down he says like you know, pay my men make sure they're paid, etc. The merchants, the British and the sort of […] the European merchants try to give him lavish gifts, he turns them all down, etc. And this is the age of the telegraph, and you know messages are, you know, reaching London. He's in The Times, you know, this guy is a sort of saintly figure who fights, you know, in an age where there's all these mercenaries fighting just for fame and wealth, he seems to be fighting for neither.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, and when they do that monument to him, Mandarin of China is something that is recognised, but is it, it’s only China that he fights in?

Abdul Mohamud:
There's the Crimea that he fights in, he fights in China.

Robin Whitburn:
But what happens next?

Abdul Mohamud:
He then sort of retires for a bit in Gravesend which is where he trained I think.

Robin Whitburn:
Where the Enderbys were.

Abdul Mohamud:
Yeah, but he's doing a pointless job there, he's building fortifications on the south coast of England for an invasion that is never going to come. And yeah, he spends his time just giving money away, educating young children, who he names Wangs, because that was the name, you know, of his soldiers in the Ever Victorious Army. This strange, like this eccentric man who by the way never actually went into battle with a gun or a sword, he only ever carried a cane which I always find interesting yeah, sort of like a medieval monk, you know that story of Odo, the bishop of Bayeux riding on horseback with only a club because he

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doesn’t want to spill blood. But anyway, Gordon then I think in 1872 after a few years, unhappy years, being followed by the press etc, he takes a job to work for the Khedive of Egypt in 1873, and Egypt by this point is actually part of the Ottoman Empire but very loosely. Four years before, the Suez Canal had opened, you know, this sort of joint British and French enterprise and it's slowly coming under British influence, and they are borrowing heavily from British and French banks. And Gordon is appointed as sort of the governor of southern Egypt, so Sudan. And he works there tirelessly, he annoys a lot of people particularly the Arab population, by imposing changes to their sort of social order. Particularly, his work against the slave trade; slavery was common practice in that part of the world. Yeah, and other things which did not endear him to the local populace, inviting missionaries, etc. All of these factors along with other things contribute to the rise of a sort of quasi-nationalist-religious-messianic figure called the Mahdi, the Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad, who builds this enormous army in Sudan. And he threatens Egypt itself, he wins many victories against the Egyptian forces and some Anglo-Egyptian forces. And the public are receiving this news, you know, Egypt has just come under the sphere of British influence, and we're about to lose it. So, who do we send? There's a public clamour for sending Gordon, so Gordon goes with *very* precise orders: you need to evacuate all British subjects from Khartoum and come home. So, he fulfils the first part and he seems to ignore the second part.

Robin Whitburn:
He evacuates, the people come home, yeah?

Abdul Mohamud:
The British subjects do come home yeah. But there are still about, I forget the exact number, but about 30-odd thousand people within Khartoum, and he uses them to basically fortify the city, that's his job, that's what he's been doing in Gravesend the last few years. And yeah, he creates a massive, brilliant fortification and you know, he thinks, they have about six months’ worth of food, but they hold out against the Mahdi's army for ten months. And in that time, everybody in Britain is reading about the plight faced by, you know, ‘Chinese Gordon’, General Gordon. And the Prime Minister William Gladstone is being harangued by people in the street, by Queen Victoria, to send a relief force, which is exactly what he didn't want to do, he didn't want to get entangled in Sudan.

Robin Whitburn:
So, so just, just, you're telling me that Gordon is disobeying the government. So he's not doing what he's been told to do.

Abdul Mohamud:
Not for the first time.

Robin Whitburn:
But is this, I mean, is this for his own ends? Is this, I mean, you said he wasn’t interested in fame and glory, I mean, why, why is he doing this?

Abdul Mohamud:
It's hard to say. He was, I think he was always a stubborn figure, somebody who decided himself what was right and what to do. Someone really unsuited for military life you would think. But, yeah, and also to some extent, he probably had a bit of a death wish I think, he was a deeply religious man, and the quote

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that he often told people when asked about his religious convictions was, ‘for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain’ which essentially just means that […]

Robin Whitburn:
Paul's letter to the Philippians. Yeah. Biblical. So he sees himself in biblical terms?

Abdul Mohamud:
Absolutely, absolutely. And he sees himself as sort of an agent of God in a sense, but you know, not unremarkable at the time, you know, Evangelicism (sic: Evangelicalism) had already swept through Britain you know, 40 years before, it's firmly entrenched in the sort of Victorian mindset, and this contributes to his celebrity, you know he’s seen as a […]

Robin Whitburn:
But then you said that, yeah but his, I mean the Prime Minister Gladstone is famous for his kind of religious conviction and moral conviction, so you kind of have two people who see morality in quite different ways it seems.

Abdul Mohamud:
Not necessarily, they agreed on almost everything except for this specific order: you need to come home. He said, and there’s a famous letter or a telegram that you know, reaches him from Cairo that says, I think halfway through the siege, ‘you need to leave right now, even if that means abandoning the people that you fortified yourself with.’ But then he said: ‘I'm not going to abandon them.’ And then a huge relief force is sent to basically ward off the Mahdi's army.

Robin Whitburn:
Do they rescue him?

Abdul Mohamud:
To rescue Gordon and that's the aim of this relief force, an Anglo-Egyptian relief force is coming down south and […]

Robin Whitburn:
And actually I've seen a, I’ve seen a cartoon, there's a Punch cartoon of Gordon being relieved by a British Army General. So the cartoon suggests that Gordon is saved and we're happy ever after?

Abdul Mohamud:
Unfortunately for Gordon, no. Two, well, the Mahdi and his army they receive notice from their scouts that this huge relief army is coming, and they triple their efforts to take Khartoum, and so two days before the relief army reaches Khartoum, the battle is already over. They've, the Mahdi's army as you can see there in that painting, there’s a really famous painting, Gordon standing there stoically at the top of the stairs. They kill Gordon, they kill most of the inhabitants and then the relief army just leaves. This is not the end of British involvement in Sudan but that's a story for another day.

Robin Whitburn:
But of course […]

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Abdul Mohamud:
And he's seen as a martyr, that's an important thing, he achieves what he wanted to.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, out of this kind of struggle between Gordon and Gladstone, it’s Gladstone who ends up losing, his government loses, only briefly, but they do, the government loses to the opposition, and Gordon's memory, Gordon gets the mausoleum and the plaque and everything else. The public prefer Gordon to Gladstone.

Abdul Mohamud:
Absolutely. Although Gladstone's statue, [he] has a statue in Westminster Abbey.

Robin Whitburn:
Oh yeah, I mean but Gladstone comes back, absolutely. It doesn’t, this episode doesn't do the government's reputation any good.

Abdul Mohamud:
No it was that prevarication. That sense ‘oh if you’d listened to us sooner, we’d still have Gordon with us’. I think that stays with Gladstone.

Robin Whitburn:
So we're almost at the end of our class but we've got one last imperial figure to talk about, haven't we? Because by the end of the, I mean this is one, a kind of famous episode in Victorian Empire, but the real fame of the Victorian Empire is the Raj, isn't it? It's what's going on in India. And here we, our final figure is this guy isn't it, George Nathaniel Curzon. I can't read his monument. What on earth? That's not English.

Abdul Mohamud:
No neither can I. It’s Latin, and a translation of it, it’s a very boring […]

Robin Whitburn:
It’s Latin. So why would Curzon have a Latin monument? I mean that’s going back to the 16th, 17th century, no one else in the Abbey from the 18th and 19th or 20th centuries has a Latin monument. What is it about this guy?

Abdul Mohamud:
George Nathaniel Curzon was probably the most sort of arrogant British official of his age, and this is an age where Britain is at its imperial heights (Robin Whitburn: And there’s some stiff competition isn’t there). There's some incredible stiff competition. He sees himself, not arrogant in the sense Gordon was, you know, he has a different kind of conviction, he has a conviction in the greatness of his own destiny. And his destiny when he was young was to be the Viceroy of India which he achieves in 1899.

Robin Whitburn:
Of course, he's born, yeah, he’s born the year after the British Raj is founded. So, the East India Company after the Great Rebellion in [18]57, the East India Company lose their political power in India, and it

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reverts, it comes into the under the kind of control of the British State. And the first Viceroy of India is in 1858, Lord Canning. And so, he's born the first year after that happens. That's interesting.

Abdul Mohamud:
And I mean he goes to, he takes the familiar route of you know, British Statesmen, you know, Eton and then Oxford but in that time…

Robin Whitburn:
It's interesting, isn’t it, that another person, sorry to interrupt, but later on in British history, another person who had the ambition from his youth to be the Viceroy of India was Enoch Powell, wasn't it?

Abdul Mohamud:
Absolutely yeah. And I'm sure he had a similar, I mean no he didn't go to Eton, [but] he definitely wanted. And that famously led to a great sort of depression in him when India gained independence in 1947.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, disappointment when the independence came, yeah. Sorry, I digress.

Abdul Mohamud:
That’s fine. Another similarity between Enoch Powell and Curzon is that they were both fluent in Urdu. Curzon was also fluent in Latin as was I think, essentially, Enoch Powell absolutely yeah. And yeah, so he was born just after, you know, the Raj is established. So throughout his life, you know, he travels, you know, as a young man he travels across the Middle East, across Persia and India, gaining knowledge of the terrain, the people, the culture, with the sole purpose of being Viceroy, and he achieves that as I said in 1899, and he's, he remains so until 1905. And he then has a brief period in the wilderness, but he joins the War Cabinet of Lloyd George in the First World War, and then becomes Foreign Secretary I think until 1923, I think it was. But he's involved in quite a few, I mean he's involved in the Treaty of Sèvres, negotiating the Treaty of Sèvres, which dismembers the Ottoman Empire. He has a deep hatred of the Ottoman Empire. And then obviously he's there long enough to be the British signatory to the Treaty of Sèvres which accepts the new borders after the Turkish nationalists win their land. But in 1919, he argues for a memorial in the middle of Whitehall for the fallen of the First World War. Initially it's a plaster or I think a wooden structure, combination of the two, and later it becomes permanent. But this is his work, he's the figure most, sort of, responsible for the erection of the Cenotaph.

Robin Whitburn:
But that's not the first monument that he is responsible for and that's what's interesting, isn't it? So, it's interesting that he does the Cenotaph, but back in 1907 he was interested in another monument. So we said that, so he finishes being Viceroy in 1906 so he comes back from India and he's back in England in 1907. And 1907 of course is the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Plassey. What about Robert Clive, fearless hero of Plassey, why was there no monument in the Abbey for him? I mean we asked that question earlier in the class, Curzon was asking that very question in 1907 and his answer was to say, we need a monument. So he campaigns not to tear down a statue but actually to put a statue up. And he is the person who is responsible primarily for getting this statue of Clive erected in London, first of all in the City, and then it gets moved in 1916 to Whitehall. So, this statue of Clive doesn't come from the 18th century, it actually comes from the early 20th century, and it’s Curzon who's responsible for it. But Curzon

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doesn't want to stop there, he doesn't want to stop with the statue because he's still fixated about the Abbey. And so, he writes, he sets up a fund, and he puts up money. He writes to the Dean of Westminster Abbey in 1913, and he puts up money for this and he says: ‘please can we have a monument to Clive in the Abbey?’. The Dean of Westminster feels under pressure to give in to this because imperialism is still, is very popular, but there's no way that there is space in the Abbey for Clive to have the magnificent Admiral Watson monument or the magnificent Eyre Coote monument. So Clive gets this fairly small plaque, it's actually no bigger really than Gordon's plaque, but Clive hasn't got that massive mausoleum anywhere either. All he's got is this small side aisle, just off the Nave. And he's got this little small monument alongside, this here I think is a great kind of 17th century monument, and there's other monuments around, that's not his, the above is not him. This is his small monument and it's the work of Lord, George Nathaniel, Lord Curzon. And so, when we're challenging Clive's monuments and saying: ‘hang on, isn't this guy responsible for corruption and evildoing in India and shenanigans?’, we're only joining in actually with what they were saying in the 18th century. What we're up against is the work of an early 20th century imperialist, Lord Curzon.

Abdul Mohamud:
And other historical revisionists like Henrietta Marshall you know […]

Robin Whitburn:
And also McCauley. In fact, McCauley in the 19th century was bigging up Clive as well, definitely.

Abdul Mohamud:
There was definitely a desire in some areas to airbrush his sort of mistakes and errors and crimes away, because he was the, his actions were the key to the British Raj in India so…

Robin Whitburn:
And in a sense you could say that you know, Clive's story really is a, in a microcosm, kind of stands for the debates about imperial, British imperial history and the significance of it in memory and nostalgia.

Abdul Mohamud:
Certainly more than the debate around Churchill's statue I think. If people are, were ever going to have a debate about a particular statue when discussing the British Empire, his would be a greater or a more fruitful sort of object of discussion.

Robin Whitburn:
Yeah, yeah. But thank you very much, this was Justice to History with Westminster Abbey. So it's goodbye and thank you for listening from me.

Abdul Mohamud:
Goodbye from me and we look forward to seeing many of you in the Q&A in April.

Biographies of speakers

Dr Robin Whitburn

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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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