

IAN HENERY

Because There Is No C In Birmingham (acrostic)

Birmingham isn't a ship on the sea
Endeavouring to find new lands to claim;
Colonies for the British monarchy
And subjects to rule under England's name.
Understand, Britannia rules, rules the waves,
Sun never sets on the British Empire:
English spoken, from cradle to the grave -

That was long ago, it went up in fire.
History teaches everything must change:
England, now, just an island off Europe
Rule Britannia no more, it sounds deranged
Embarrassing - a bitter cup to sup.

Island nation, now struggling with woke,
Sleeps no more, awakens to a new age

Not yesterday under slavery's yoke -
Open your eyes to our history's books!

Captured in freeze frame, forgotten statue

It stands on a plinth, Birmingham's Bullring
Nelson - unseen by shoppers who pass through

Bags in both hands, focused on their shopping,
Intent on social media profiles.
Rapturously they gaze into selfies,
Mesmerised by beauty they pout and smile

Continued

Into a digital world unhealthily.
Nelson looks down on this, not of their world,
Gazing into screens or heading to shops.
He is trapped, no Royal Ensign is unfurled,
As unpalatable as bilge water slops
Marooned on a plinth, history's full stop.

The bronze statute was the first statute of Nelson in Britain. It was made in 1809 following Nelson's visit to Birmingham. Following the Rhodes Must fall campaign in South Africa and the removal of confederate monuments in the United States statutes of Nelson faced criticism because of his support for slavery and colonialism. An identical statue in Bridgetown Barbados - by the same sculpture and based on the same design - was defaced and a sign attached describing Nelson as a "racist white supremacist". The Birmingham statue includes a short biography of Nelson but doesn't mention the issues of colonialism or slavery.

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Continued

Conversation with Horatio Nelson in Birmingham's Bullring

My life became painfully immobile
Following my visit to Birmingham
And sailing out to meet Napoleon.
We were expected to do our duty
And I did - the Battle of Trafalgar.
Uniformed, with HMS Victory
But now forgotten - except by pigeons -
I am just an invisible statue.

Birmingham's first public memorial,
The first of its kind in the British Isles.
Scowling bronze visage from a pedestal:
Reposed, one arm resting on an anchor,
Fenced by iron spikes, flanked by four cannons
Which supported magnificent lamp posts -
Now invisible? How did it happen?
A statue unnoticed in the Bullring?

I beheld surrender of the seasons,
Reminder of cultural heritage.
A monument of political power,
Physical presence, symbolic status,
I saw it all. Watched springs turn to winters,
Survived Nazi air raids, IRA bombs,
But my gnawing vacancy grew within
And into a throbbing bottomless void.

Why? I thought I was a secular saint,
Naval hero who sacrificed his life
Saving my country from Napoleon.
A painting shortly after Trafalgar
Showed me ascending to Mount Olympus
On the wings of angels to take my place

Continued

Amongst the gods - the start of an orgy
Of commemoration across Empire.

Within this bronze shell, my still beating heart,
Infected by loss and bitter anguish -
Through turning of the years - I have evolved
Into a forgotten obscure statue;
Rooted both silently and helplessly,
Watching Birmingham's diverse life flourish
Like a movie patron views from afar
The screen - but there is no happy ending.

Off the grid, rainwater on my parched tongue,
Hungry man must be fed, weeping infant
Will seek sanctuary and affection
And an exhausted body seeks out rest.
Truisms of human experience
As is our common desire to be loved.
Am I to be mocked, held up in contempt,
For yearning for what is natural?

On my plinth in a labyrinth of shops
I have vainly sought out warmth and passion
Beneath the neon lights blaring out brands ,
Encircling apartments, adverts, glass
And more steel-plated walls of reflection
Where my image has withered and mocked me.
Perched in the Bullring, imperial clad,
A forgotten statue in Birmingham.

I have not been targeted by protesters
Like those in Cape Town, Kyiv or Charlottesville,
The campaigns against imperialism.
I stand here covered in pigeon droppings,
Compete with iconic Selfridges store
And the Bronze Bull in Birmingham's Bullring
And out of place like colonialism;
A forgotten part of the cityscape.

Continued

I know other colonial statues,
The handsome faces of English statesmen,
Become covered in names of passers by
Or lovers with a permanent marker
And based neither on fondness or grudges.
What's my legacy? In sight, out of mind,
Relic, put on a plinth and forgotten,
Much like our imperial legacy?

I will not succumb to imprisonment
Or modern history's woke world order.
A saviour will come, with chisel in hand
And I will be taken down and released,
Set free to become a chameleon,
Merge unobserved into the city's heart
And into my new lifeless surroundings
Forgotten, at one with the bricks and mortar.

There is a statue in Birmingham's Bullring that commemorates the Battle of Trafalgar. It's the statue of an arch imperialist that once imposed a racist and violent order and it's now covered with pigeon droppings.

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