

The Butcher of Allahabad

James George Smith Neill.

Does the name mean anything to you? Probably not. It sounds like that old bloke in the pub (remember those?) rhyming off the starting line-up of a mediocre Scottish football team from a long forgotten 0-0 draw in 1947.

Should it mean anything to you? We'll come back to that.

[The murder of George Floyd](#) under the knee of a white American police officer sparked global outrage and has led to wider questions of the legacy of colonialism, slavery and continuing systemic racism against Black communities around the world.

Usually the reaction in Britain ranges from smug complacency – “Oh isn't America *so awful*, that sort of thing just *doesn't happen here*” ([even though it does](#))- to outright denial that racism in Britain [is even a valid concern](#), said in all seriousness [by a man with a long, sordid history of racist remarks](#). Alongside this is a mawkish, rose tinted view of the British Empire as a benign “civilizing” force that rose to worldwide dominance through good old-fashioned derring-do rather than the ruthless, bloody exploitation of conquered peoples' land and wealth.

[However, the toppling and sinking of the statue of Edward Colston](#) -a notorious slave trader who had gazed over Bristol city centre since 1895 -by Black Lives Matter protesters has ignited a long overdue conversation about Britain's own culpability in the transatlantic slave trade, the racist attitudes that perpetuated it and the true nature of the men we commemorate on plinths around the country.

As Colston lies at the bottom of Bristol harbour, attention has turned to other monuments that lionize the men of Imperial Britain. The Stop Trump Coalition in support of Black Lives Matter has created an interactive map called “[Topple the Racists](#)” that has identified around 60 statues of slave owners and colonialists that they say should be removed so that “Britain can finally face the truth about its past.”

Well known examples include [Cecil Rhodes](#), whose statue at Oriel College at Oxford University has been the subject of a long running campaign demanding its removal due to his role in colonial South Africa and [Henry Dundas](#), whose likeness towers above Edinburgh despite his infamous role in delaying the abolition of slavery in Britain by a further 15 years in 1792.

It was with no little interest then that when looking at the map I noticed that my hometown of Ayr had been pinpointed as having a monument to a racist. I wracked my brain – who could they mean? The statue of Robert Burns in Burns Statue Square? After all, Scotland's National [bard did accept a job to – in his own words- be a “poor negro driver”](#) – on a sugar plantation in Jamaica that was firmly built on the backs of black slave labour. As it was, fate intervened when Burns' poetry won instant acclaim allowing him to not take the job.

Instead, it is the statue of one James George Smith Neill that has been highlighted. Wellington Square is a short walk away from Burns Statue Square, where the County Buildings and Ayr Sheriff Court can be found on the way to the Ayrshire seafront. Having lived in Ayr most of my life, it's a place I have walked around countless times. Teenage me watched The Proclaimers play a gig there while getting very drunk on strategically hidden cider, never giving a second thought to the statue that greeted me as I smuggled my cargo through the square's eastern entrance.

[James George Smith Neill](#). Who was he? The inscription on the statue's base reads: *JAMES GEORGE SMITH NEILL C.B./ AIDE-DE-CAMP TO THE QUEEN/ LIEUTENANT COLONEL IN THE MADRAS ARMY/*

BRIGADIER GENERAL IN INDIA/ A BRAVE, RESOLUTE, SELF-RELIANT SOLDIER/ UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED AS THE FIRST/ WHO STEMMED THE TORRENT OF REBELLION/ IN BENGAL/ HE FELL GLORIOUSLY/ AT THE RELIEF OF LUCKNOW/ 25TH SEPTEMBER 1857/ AGED 47.

On the face of it, this seems a standard memorial to a local boy (he was born in Dalry) who became a soldier, valiantly giving his life in service to his country in helping put down the Indian Rebellion in 1857, especially in light of the horrific [Bibighar Massacre](#) where rebels murdered innocent women & children, dismembered their corpses and dumped the remains into a well. No one would shed any tears over the summary justice meted out to the perpetrators of such a heinous act of barbarism, so much so that “Remember Cawnpore!” became the rallying cry of General Neill and his forces as they advanced toward the rebel-held city of Lucknow, where he was fatally shot in the head by a sharpshooter as they entered the city.

However, this inscription doesn't tell the whole story.

In contrast to the “brave, resolute, self-reliant soldier” as described on his statue, he is remembered rather differently in India as the “[Butcher of Allahabad](#).” The rebels had it coming to them you might say given the atrocity committed in Cawnpore, but did the non-combatant natives?

On the way to Lucknow, Neill ordered the burning down of villages and indiscriminate killings of Indians whether they were combatants or not, personally executing many prisoners himself. One particularly brutal story of his brutality involved Neill rounding up those of the Brahmin caste – who had nothing to do with the massacre at Bibighar- and forcing them to clean up the blood of the victims, a knowing insult to their caste. They were then whipped and hanged.

These don't sound like the acts of a “brave, resolute” soldier. By any [modern definition](#), the deliberate targeting of civilians and execution without trial would more than meet the criteria for war crimes. But no one in Ayr would ever say that there is a statue of a war criminal in their town.

But there is.

Some would argue that his brutality was necessary and justified given the atrocity committed at Cawnpore, that his was an innately human reaction to gross inhumanity. But you cannot criticize one atrocity while erasing knowledge of our own. If the British Empire were the civilizing force that it claimed to be then surely it would not have used the same brutal tactics of the “savages” they were fighting?

But it did.

Indeed, so notorious was Neill's reputation in India that decades later in 1937, a similar statue that was erected in the Indian city of Madras in 1861 was [quietly taken down and placed in the cities museum](#) as a compromise between the ruling British and the growing Indian Independence movement. Pointedly, the statue was placed in the anthropology section where it remains to this day.

Yet you'd be hard pressed to find anyone in the town of Ayr who has any idea of this. I was born, raised and have lived in Ayr for most of my life, walking past the statue countless times yet but for the iconoclastic act of those protesters in Bristol I would remain blissfully ignorant of the brutal reputation of the man it commemorates, precisely demonstrating the point that protesters were making about historical ignorance.

I'm not saying that the statue should be torn down unilaterally. But given the cultural moment we are living through, is it not right and proper that we all stop to consider what leaving such

monuments up says about the society we live in and our relationship with our history? Have Ayr's Indian community – Wellington Square is home to two popular Indian restaurants, one of which the General stands [directly across from](#) – ever been consulted about whether such a statue can be considered appropriate anymore? That's not for me to decide but surely these questions must be asked.

If "[war makes monsters of us all](#)" surely it's fair to point out that those we literally put on a pedestal such as General Neill were more than capable of becoming monsters themselves and that there should be some sort of acknowledgement of that.

Otherwise the General could be the next statue that goes for a swim.