

Trafalgar Square: a public lecture

Close your eyes. Imagine that we could change the past. Consider what would happen if we altered the outcome of just one event in history. Imagine, for instance, that Britain had in fact lost the Second World War. Hold that thought for a moment. Now open your eyes: what would you see? What would this square look like?

Different, undoubtedly. But in what way? Would the monuments be the same? Who would be standing on the pedestals? Would Nelson still be on his column? Well, yes, he probably would – just not here. Not if 'Operation Sealion' had been realised.

'Operation Sealion' was the code name for Germany's planned invasion of Britain in 1940. One part of that plan was to move Nelson's Column to Berlin. This symbol that Britain once 'ruled the waves' would have become a trophy at the heart of the capital of the 'Thousand Year Reich'.

This reveals two things. Firstly, that what monuments mean shifts as the context around them shifts. It is the context that determines what they mean. Secondly, the planned relocation of Nelson reminds us that monuments are all about power. The power to choose who to remember, how and where. The power to preserve a person or an event in metal or stone. The power to render them immortal. To make them live on for all eternity.

To attack a monument is to challenge the social order – to undermine that power. Again, Nelson illustrates this point nicely. The city of Dublin, for example, used to have a column just like this one. Nelson was on the top too. It got blown up by the IRA in 1966. The destruction had a meaning: it was a birthday present marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising.

Nelson has had a happier time of it in Birmingham. His statue there still stands. But everything else around him has changed. He's in the Bullring. Does he mean anything to the shoppers as they rush in and out of Selfridges?

But that monument in Birmingham, like all the ones we see here, holds stubbornly on. They are hangovers from history. And you know how it is with hangovers. The past gets a bit hazy. Events become confused. Fact and fiction merge as we slowly start to recall things that we would probably prefer to forget.

This was clearly the case for the former mayor of London, Ken Livingstone. He wanted to remove two symbols of Britain's imperial past: General Sir Charles Napier (1782-1853) by George Adams (1855) and Major General Sir Henry Havelock (1795-1857) by William Behnes (1861).

'I haven't got a clue who they are', said Livingstone. 'In our main square in our capital city the people on the plinths should be identifiable to most of the population.'

With this in mind, Livingstone suggested adding another Nelson here: Nelson Mandela. It would have been an appropriate location given the anti-apartheid protests that used to be held outside South Africa House. And it was from the balcony of that building that Mandela addressed the people of London in 1996. Trafalgar Square was also the location for the South Africa Freedom Day Concert that took place in April 2001.

But Mandela is not here. Instead he's down the road. That's because London's memorial landscape is zoned: Trafalgar Square has three kings and two generals, but it is primarily a place for naval leaders; the likes of Nelson, Jellicoe and Beatty.

The political leaders meanwhile are clustered around parliament. The space outside – Parliament Square – was originally laid out in the 1860s as a pantheon for politicians. Prime ministers, Peel, Palmerston, Derby and Disraeli are all there on their respective pedestals.

Parliament Square was redesigned as part of the Festival of Britain of 1951. As a consequence the Victorian premiers were all moved from the centre of the square to its edge. This is telling: it shows that they have, quite literally, shifted to the periphery. There have all, to varying degrees, been forgotten.

There is a nice story connected to this. When the post-war redesign of Parliament Square was announced it became evident that there was going to be a prominent, empty space in the north-west corner right next to Big Ben. A fat finger hovered over the architectural plans and a deep voice intoned: 'That's where my statue is going to be.' The finger belonged to Winston Churchill. And he was right.

The 'Greatest Briton' stands there to this day. He is so famous that his pedestal carries just one word: Churchill. But will he always be great and will he always be remembered? In years to come will our children's children ask: 'Granddad, who was Churchill?' It's a dead certainty that he be as distant a memory as Havelock, whose fame was as great as Churchill's when he died in 1857.

Havelock stands at one axis that runs from here down to Churchill in Parliament Square. Nelson, Napier, Hague, Cambridge, Montgomery: all are commemorated nearby. What do they have in common? War, war, war. And what is it good for? Well, it's good for nations to construct their stories. Stories about defence, liberty, sacrifice. War is given meaning. Death is not the end: these are our 'glorious' dead.

Monuments play a crucial role in this. They give a conflict a name, a date, a list of heroes and accord it a place in the national narrative.

But war memorials are troubling. Yes, they can and should commemorate the dead; those men and women who gave the ultimate sacrifice. But don't they also encourage the next generation to die the same way? Nelson's motto is: 'England expects that every man will do his duty'. But is his duty to fight and die? To become a name on a memorial?

Will my four month old nephew Charlie Burch enlist to fight in some future war? Will he be like Rifleman Cyrus Thatcher? If so he has about 18 years of life left to live.

Cyrus Thatcher was just 19 years old when he died in an explosion in Southern Helmand province on 2nd June this year. He merits our full respect and should never be forgotten. That's why I've chosen to mention him here.

But what did he die for? In Nottingham, the town where I live, is a memorial to the first and second Anglo-Afghan wars: 1839-42 and 1878-80. So what war is this? The third? Well, no actually – that appears to have taken place in 1919. So this must be the fourth Anglo-Afghan war. Will there be a fifth and a sixth?

Looking back the wars of the past seem to make some sort of sense if we judge them by the standards of their time. Yet today they look like acts of blatant imperialism. Can we be so sure that the future will not also judge what we are doing in Afghanistan in the same way?

The message of Nottingham's memorial to the First and Second Anglo-Afghan wars seems to have gone unheeded. It has failed to teach us very much about the futility of Britain's military involvement in that country. How many people know, for example, that General Havelock waged a war on exactly the same spot where Cyrus Thatcher fought? The place where Cyrus died – Gereshk – was captured during the First Anglo-Afghan War and lost in the Second. Britain is still fighting for it today.

Aside from a sense of futility, this raises an important question: can we be absolutely certain that the problems in today's Afghanistan are not in some small, indirect way a product of our own involvement there some 170 years ago?

Perhaps if we knew more about history – more about this statue of Havelock – then we would be in a better position to answer this question and thereby determine whether the death of Cyrus Thatcher has any meaning whatsoever.

But at least Cyrus Thatcher's name will live on. Or will it? On the front of Havelock's statue is a quotation: 'Soldiers! Your labours, your privations, your sufferings and your valour, will not be forgotten by a grateful country'.

But they *are* forgotten.

Nevertheless, wars continue. And so too do war memorials. Consider the Iraq war, for example. What would be an appropriate memorial for the Iraq conflict? How about a full-scale bombed out market stall? They could use Sindh Kalay, a mock Afghan village that the British army has built in Norfolk to prepare its troops for their deployment in Afghanistan.

This isn't as far fetched as it sounds. One of the most moving memorials to the Second World War is an accidental one: it's the theatre in Valletta, the capital of Malta. Designed by the British architect, Edward Barry, it was bombed during one of the Luftwaffe's relentless attacks on that tiny island. It remains a ruin to this day. The rubble will soon be cleared away. This I feel is a mistake. For the wrecked building captures the true, destructive nature of war far more effectively than do these nice sleek memorials topped with statues of healthy-looking men.

Malta, like Britain and so many other countries, places the Second World War at the centre of their national story. Europe's nations shape their identity around it.

It is unsurprising therefore that one of the biggest divisions in today's Europe is precisely to do with the meaning of that conflict. Tensions between Russia and the rest of Europe find their roots in the interpretation of the Second World War. What Russia calls the 'Great Patriotic War' did not start until 1941. Countless millions of Russians died for the liberation of Europe from fascism. Any attempt to question the Soviet Union's role during and after the conflict prompts Moscow to raise an accusing finger and warn that fascism is once again rearing its ugly head in the new Europe.

This came to a climax in 2007. The flash point was the Estonian government's decision to remove a Soviet era war memorial from the centre of the capital, Tallinn. It was re-erected in a military cemetery, but not before riots had erupted in the streets. On the one side of the barricade were those who interpreted the memorial as a positive symbol of the defeat of Nazism by the Red Army. Others looked upon it as merely a reminder that one occupying regime (the Nazis) had been replaced by another (the Soviet Union). They pointed out that it would take Estonia nearly 50 years

for it to regain its independence and emerge from behind the Iron Curtain.

The relocation of the Estonian war memorial and the riots that ensued shows that, in certain contexts, memorials can cease being overlooked lumps of metal and suddenly turn into commemorative dynamite – like blowing up Nelson in Dublin or toppling Saddam Hussein in Baghdad.

All monuments need some sort of trigger to make them speak. That's exactly the role of Remembrance Sunday: the day every November when, both here and up and down the country, people gather around the nation's monuments to war. The people themselves become portable memorials by wearing red poppies.

The Cenotaph down the road on Whitehall gets covered in a sea of wreaths every November. This November will be all the more poignant because, for the first time since 1919, no witnesses to the First World War will be present. With Harry Patch's funeral last Thursday the living link with the war was broken. It is now History. There are no Tommies who were there to tell us what it was really like – to confirm that it really did happen. It is up to us to tell the story. For Historians like me to take the lead. Because, whilst history is about facts, facts are nothing without interpretation. And if we choose to forget or ignore the past then we leave the way open for those who will seek to use it to confirm their own prejudices, to seek to infect the present with their distorted versions of history.

That's why we should value the monuments we see around us – to use them to ask questions not just of the past but of the present too.

All too often, however, monuments like those of Havelock and Napier look too distant, too irrelevant for us to make much sense of them.

And that's where contemporary art can come in. Just as a fresh wreath of poppies brings a war memorial to life, so too can modern art shed new light on a seemingly dead landscape.

This was clear when I went to Liverpool for last year's city of culture celebrations. Liverpool has its own Nelson. It's an amazing representation of the hero. It shows Nelson's soul leaving his skeletal body and rising up to heaven. This was made even more remarkable by the temporary insertion of a huge crystal-studded spider by the Chinese artist, Ai Weiwei. It hung in the air above Nelson's head.

This plinth is similar to that spider. The works placed here reframe the familiar faces. Nelson has had a number of temporary neighbours, starting in 1999 with Mark Wallinger's figure of Christ. Wallinger's work was entitled *Ecce Homo*: 'behold the man'. This could just as easily have referred to Nelson and the other men commemorated here as it did to Christ himself. Wallinger's Christ held up a mirror to them, prompting comparisons. The vulnerable looking figure of Christ perched precariously on the edge of this pedestal was life-sized and coloured white like Carrara marble. The black, bronzed Havelock and Napier looked enormous in comparison. Christ, the epitome of non-violence, was at the heart of a square that revels in war. Christ, a symbol of the ultimate sacrifice resonated with Nelson, a secular saint who laid down his life for his country.

All this prompted us to think about the precise nature of leadership and heroism. And what can we deduce about these attributes from the monuments around us? Well, if we take this square as the acid-test for heroism and leadership then we are forced to make the following conclusion: heroes and leaders are men. There are no women here.

Fortunately this isn't entirely true. There *are* statuefied women if you look carefully enough. The First World War nurse, Edith Cavell is just around the corner; and the Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst is next to parliament. There are sculptural women on the pediment of the National Gallery – but the latter are not real, identifiable individuals, merely allegorical figures.

Will statues of women come to Trafalgar Square? Well, I once heard that Margaret Thatcher could be commemorated here. One of the most iconic images of Lady Thatcher are those that depict her riding a Challenger tank with a white headscarf billowing behind her. This could be recreated here, with the pedestal transformed into the tank. The Iron

Lady transfigured into metal and immortalised alongside Nelson.

But where are the role models for young women today? I've got three nieces – Sian aged 11, Eloise, 9 and Grace 2. Who should they aspire to emulate? Well that's a difficult question to answer. The challenges they face are brilliantly expressed by Lily Allen in her song entitled, appropriately enough, *The Fear*. Lily, like all her sisters, has been moulded into 'a weapon of massive consumption'. She's not concerned about 'guns and... ammunition' because the one thing she's programmed to do is to shop, shop, shop. She doesn't 'know what's right and what's real anymore' but she does know that 'life's about film stars and less about mothers'. And her goal in life? 'To be rich' – and famous: 'And I'll take my clothes off and it will be shameless / Cause everyone knows that's how you get famous / I'll look at *The Sun* and I'll look in *The Mirror* / I'm on the right track yeah I'm onto a winner.' Lily knows that there's only one thing that matters: 'everything's cool as long as I'm getting thinner'.

Lily Allen's song explains why *The Sun* didn't much like the one sculpture of a woman to have graced this plinth. This was *Alison Lapper, Pregnant* by Marc Quinn. *The Sun* marked its arrival in 2005 by renaming this space 'Travulgur Square'. It was vulgar because the naked representation didn't accord with *The Sun's* idea of female beauty. Lapper's breasts were not Page 3 material. The newspaper's disgust was undoubtedly heightened by the fact that Lapper suffers from Phocomelia syndrome and has no arms and truncated legs.

Despite this she is a successful artist and a mother. But life's about film stars and less about mothers, isn't it? Remember that things are only cool if you're thin, rich and famous.

Alison Lapper challenges all these things. She also makes us question notions of heroism. For someone in a wheelchair simply travelling around this city is challenge enough. And by highlighting Lapper's physique we were encouraged to notice something about Nelson that we easily overlook: he too was disabled.

We need more role models like Alison Lapper. People that do not conform to the media's idea of beauty. The service men and women who have been injured in the line of military duty shouldn't hide away for fear of upsetting the readers of tabloid newspapers: they ought to be placed here on this pedestal.

The effect of Lapper's sculpture confirmed that this 'empty plinth' represents a brilliant opportunity. And there can be no better use of this space than Antony Gormley's work *One and Other*. It is perfect. It is absolutely democratic and completely representative of the whole country.

I, like all the temporary occupants, am standing here not because I'm special or anything but because a computer chose my name at random. That's entirely appropriate given that we live in the age of the accidental hero.

111-year-old Harry Patch – a plumber from Somerset who just happened to be the last man standing – is the ultimate example of this. There could be no better person to bring down the veil on the First World War than this everyday hero who preached peace and reconciliation.

And don't forget that this square is full of accidental heroes. Take George IV for instance: he was king by an accident of birth. Even his statue is here by mistake. It was originally intended to stand outside Buckingham Palace on the top of Marble Arch. He was only placed here temporarily in 1843 – but he has stayed here ever since.

George's brother William IV (1765-1837) should be here on this plinth. But he didn't leave enough money in his will. And he wasn't sufficiently popular to inspire a fund-raising campaign. His nickname – Silly Billy – says it all.

Actually, Silly Billy might well have been a very suitable person to stand on this plinth. His reign coincided with the Reform Bill crisis of the early 1830s: the first tentative step towards democracy in this country. It would be fitting to commemorate this event in Trafalgar Square given its role as a place of popular protest.

For although this square and its monuments appear to exude power and authority, it is really the masses who take centre stage. People come here in their droves from all over the world. The photographs they take must fill countless family photo albums. Trafalgar Square's monuments thus feature as commemorative characters in millions of personal stories.

In previous times these everyday histories would go unrecorded. Our names, as Keats put it, are 'writ in water', unlike the names of those around us that are forged in metal and carved in stone.

But my insignificant name, like all those who have taken part in *One and Other*, will live on thanks to Antony Gormley. Gormley, like all great artists, is a facilitator: a person that inspires people to achieve things; a person who allows other people's voices to be heard. The creative future will be a flat plane. No longer will there be artists and audiences. Instead everyone will be creating.

One and Other will be seen as a landmark in art. Gormley's work marks a stage in the development of sculpture. Just as memorials to the First World War were the first to properly list all the names of the dead in a non-hierarchical manner, so too has this project given voice to the many, not the few.

There are, of course, those in authority that fear this. People like Nicholas Penny, the director of the National Gallery. He would rather have cars here than people. He has described Gormley's work as 'symptomatic of... [a] pervasive antagonism to architectural order.' What on earth does that mean?

I think that what Penny and other elitists like him need to accept is that the age of deference is over – or at least it should be. These bronze chaps can stay here. But either they need to climb down from their pedestals, or we "normal" people need to be lifted up to their level. Lifted up, not so that we can daub them with paint, but so that we can (metaphorically speaking) ask them why they did what they did – and ponder what the world might look like had they behaved differently. In so doing we will be able to revisit these statues, looking for messages that they might have

for us today and prompting us to wonder what other people and events we have forgotten.

And what about those who question whether Gormley's *One and Other* is art? Well, it should be clear from the sculptures here that art comes in all shapes and sizes. Is Henry Havelock over there 'art'?

One thing is certain: if Germany had won the Second World War then Adolf Hitler would be on that column over there, not Nelson. And this square would be no place for protest or dissent.

The Nazis with their perverse ideas of what constituted art and what was 'degenerate' would have tolerated neither Antony Gormley nor Alison Lapper nor, for that matter, me. And the name of this place would not be Trafalgar Square – it would be Adolf Hitler Platz.

But this leaves us with a conundrum: without war and without people like Churchill surely this *would indeed* be Adolf Hitler Platz?

Or is it instead the case that war breeds war? That the roots of the Second World War lay in the First. That to understand what is happening in today's Afghanistan we should start with the Havelock statue over there?

So, yes, we should remember the likes of Havelock, Churchill and the other military leaders. But we would be much better off turning our attention to another monument: that commemorating Edith Cavell just around the corner outside the National Portrait Gallery. Cavell was a British nurse in German-occupied Belgium during the First World War. She was accused of helping Allied soldiers and was executed by firing squad in October 1915. Her final words are inscribed into the pedestal of her statue: 'Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness for anyone'. Maybe if more people paid heed to these words the likes of 19 year old Rifleman Cyrus Thatcher would still be alive today.