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On Museums, Conflict, and Forgetting: An Immutable Cultural Heritage?

Abstract

Forgetfulness is not a trait generally associated with museums. In principle, they endeavour to cultivate a direct link with the past by safeguarding the surviving material fragments of our cultural inheritance. However, for every object or narrative that museums preserve, there are many more that they cannot retain. This paper thus explores the symbiotic relationship of remembering and forgetting within contemporary museological practice. Drawing on the fall of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol and its subsequent afterlife as a museum object, it considers the pressures on all institutions to forget in a time of marked cultural upheaval. This process is particularly significant for museums concerned with human conflict, a subject whose legacy is often highly contentious. This study draws on the example of the Royal Armouries, the UK's national museum of arms and armour, to explore the dynamics of forgetting in an institution whose work is inextricably bound up with conflict. It assesses the diverse reasons for forgetting at this institution, including the enduring influence of historical assumptions, the strength of public opinion, legal obligations, and the promotion of inclusivity. These processes are shown to highlight the plurality of forgetting in museums, which requires institutions to adopt a flexible approach to its challenges. Ultimately, this paper addresses a perpetual dilemma faced by museums, but one that has become especially pressing in the current climate of heightened cultural sensitivity: what is it acceptable for a museum to forget?

Museums, Cultural Upheaval, and the Challenges of Forgetting

On 7 June 2020, a statue of Edward Colston was toppled and then tossed into Bristol harbour by a crowd of anti-racism protestors. This momentous event ignited an intense national conversation over the nature of his memorialisation, as to whether he should be remembered as a slave trader, a philanthropist, or an uneasy combination of the two.¹ These ongoing debates have highlighted the sensitivities surrounding the transmission of historical memory, a process in which museums play a crucial role. Their involvement in Colston's 'afterlife' has certainly been noteworthy: first taken into protective custody by Bristol City Council, then

¹ Jessica Moody, 'Off the Pedestal: The Fall of Edward Colston', *Public History Review*, 28 (2021), 1-5 (pp. 1-2).

temporarily displayed at Bristol's M Shed museum, and now returned to the latter's stores for the time being.² It has been a journey of complications that has seen this contested figure flit in and out of public awareness, while never being lost from view entirely. A complex interplay of remembering and forgetting has been evident throughout. In an unexpected turn of events, a campaign group named Save Our Statues – proclaiming their opposition to 'criminal violence' and 'mob rule' – protested the statue's removal by booking out its exhibition at the M Shed to prevent visitors from observing its disfigured state.³ Their actions were calculated to criticise its public exhibition in a museum, perceiving it as a tacit endorsement of its unauthorised removal. This episode could be read as an attempt to return to the previous status quo, as if the events of 7 June 2020 had never occurred. Paradoxically, any effort to erase particular aspects of Colston's complex history (or his statue's history, for that matter) is unlikely to succeed, for the simple reason that the increased attention serves to embed it more deeply in cultural consciousness. As of September 2022, the statue's fate remains uncertain, but from the outset there has been considerable support for it to enter a museum collection permanently.⁴ If this does transpire, it will be intriguing to observe how this new status influences the conversation surrounding this totemic object. Whatever the statue's eventual fate, it seems inconceivable that Colston or his contentious legacy will be forgotten any time soon.

This episode foregrounds the fragile tension that exists between remembering and forgetting in the public discourse around cultural identity, and the complex role of museums in mediating this dialogue. According to the definition adopted by the International Council of Museums – recently ratified by an overwhelming majority of its members – these institutions seek to serve the cause of memory, furthering our understanding of past societies through the stewardship and interpretation of their cultural legacy.⁵ If you accept this particular conception of the museum's role, then forgetting surely contradicts their fundamental purpose. Yet, the compulsion to forget still has a profound effect on their operations. One of its numerous manifestations is a consequence of the institution's materiality. Given the immense profusion of the past, museums are simply unable to

² Nickolas Lambrianou, 'Monumental Failures: The Contested Bodies and Sites of Public Art under Lockdown', *The Sculpture Journal*, 31 (2022), 75-92 (pp. 75-76, 89-90).

³ Damien Gayle, 'Campaigners Try to Block Edward Colston Display at Bristol Museum', *Guardian*, 7 June 2021 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jun/07/campaigners-try-to-block-edward-colston-display-at-bristol-museum>> [accessed 5 July 2022].

⁴ Saima Nasar, 'Remembering Edward Colston: Histories of Slavery, Memory, and Black Globality', *Women's History Review*, 29 (2020), 1218-25 (p. 1224).

⁵ International Council of Museums, 'Museum Definition' <<https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>> [accessed 27 August 2022].

safeguard everything for posterity.⁶ All physical institutions, whatever their size or status, are subject to the practical considerations of space, cost, and manpower, which compel them to be selective in what they preserve. These natural limitations are central to understanding the controversial issue of disposal, a process commonly associated with the spectre of forgetting. The removal of objects from museums can help rationalise their collections and release valuable resources for use elsewhere, but it also risks cultural loss if the new owner does not share their commitment to universal access.⁷ Opponents of the controversial 2014 Sekhemka sale – where Northampton Museum offloaded an ancient Egyptian statue to a private buyer – feared that this invaluable item could permanently disappear from public view.⁸ Alienating what is perceived to be communal heritage is basically anathema, certainly in a British context. Therefore, the removal of accessioned objects from museum collections is only deemed acceptable under extremely limited circumstances, lest their significance be forgotten for good.

The peculiar relationship between museums and forgetting is also shaped by external pressures. As the supposed guardians of public memory, they can become the focus of controversy when their actions are perceived to ‘cancel’ prevailing narratives. In the wake of Colston’s fall, the impassioned debates over the interpretive capacity of museums have even elicited Government intervention. All taxpayer-funded museums are now expected to observe the official line of ‘retain and explain’, a stance predicated on the idea that the removal of contested heritage is tantamount to forgetting it and should be avoided at all costs.⁹ The veiled threat is that their funding from the Government could be cut if they do not comply. Many voices across the cultural sector have challenged this development, perceiving it as a politically motivated assault on institutional and curatorial independence. The Museums Association, the professional representative of British museums, for example, has openly articulated its disquiet. In October 2020, it published an open letter expressing concern that implementing ‘retain and explain’ would compromise the ability of museums to make

⁶ Sharon Macdonald, Jennie Morgan, and Harald Fredheim, ‘Too Many Things to Keep for the Future?’, in *Heritage Futures: Comparative Approaches to Natural and Cultural Heritage Practices*, ed. by Rodney Harrison and others (London: UCL Press, 2020), pp. 155-68 (p. 155).

⁷ Steven Miller, *Museum Collection Ethics: Acquisition, Stewardship, and Interpretation* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), pp. 57-58.

⁸ Janet Ulph, ‘The Museums Association’s Code of Ethics 2015’, *Art Antiquity and Law*, 21 (2016), 143-56 (p. 152).

⁹ Gabrielle Garton Grimwood, *Contested Heritage: Controversy Surrounding Public Monuments* (London: House of Commons Library, 2021), pp. 5-6.

‘carefully considered decisions about contested heritage’.¹⁰ Interestingly, it was not the substance of the policy but the UK Government’s role as its proposed executor that was the focus of the Museum Association’s objections. Securing relative influence over the enduring legacies of cultural heritage is clearly a priority of both the museum sector and the political establishment.¹¹ At stake is the power to determine what is preserved as culturally significant and what is ultimately forgotten. This underlying struggle for mastery raises a series of challenging questions to which there are no easy answers. Who should make key decisions about the alienation of cultural heritage? What is an acceptable level of political involvement in this process? Are there appropriate safeguards to ensure that museums act in the public interest? How should public interest even be defined? As long as there is disagreement over these fundamental matters, the role of forgetting in museums will remain a battleground.

Museums, Memory, and Conflict: The Plurality of Forgetting

The battlefield metaphor is apt, as the tension between remembering and forgetting is especially strong in museums that explore human conflict. Striking an acceptable balance between these two competing claims is a delicate business in such a contested area of historical memory. As the national museum of arms and armour, operating sites in Leeds, London, and Portsmouth, the Royal Armouries (hereafter, the Armouries) is no stranger to this challenge. It is important to note, however, that it approaches the subject from a slightly different perspective than other comparable institutions. It is better characterised as a museum *about* conflict than a museum *of* conflict, given that it specialises in the development of armaments from antiquity to the present day. Nevertheless, its engagement with many of the same issues makes it an instructive case study to explore the peculiar relationships between museums, conflict, and forgetting. Firstly, forgetfulness can be furthered inadvertently by institutions, the result of longstanding assumptions or practices. Historically, museums have privileged ‘elite’ experiences of various forms through their collecting and interpretation, leading to alternative narratives being overlooked and even forgotten.¹² The historical legacies of conflict, both intellectual and material, exhibit this tendency. It is

¹⁰ Museums Association, ‘Our Response to Oliver Dowden’s Letter on Contested Heritage’ <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/ethics/our-response-to-oliver-dowdens-letter/>> [accessed 4 July 2022].

¹¹ Rhiannon Mason and Joanne Sayner, ‘Bringing Museal Silence into Focus: Eight Ways of Thinking about Silence in Museums’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 25 (2019), 5-20 (p. 8).

¹² Kevin Coffee, ‘Cultural Inclusion, Exclusion and the Formative Roles of Museums’, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 23 (2008), 261-79 (p. 262).

certainly visible in the gender imbalance that permeates museums of conflict, one that has largely consigned women to the margins. The subject has traditionally been viewed as a male preserve, an assumption that has continued to influence museum engagement with the history of conflict. The Armouries' Keeper of Firearms, for example, has acknowledged that women are barely represented in its firearms collections or displays.¹³ This persistent historical assumption therefore still has the power to dictate which narratives are remembered or forgotten in the museum, not least through their accumulated material holdings. There are nevertheless signs that the Armouries is starting to revise its approach in this area. In 2019, it purchased a set of female body armour for its collections.¹⁴ This acquisition represents a conscious attempt to reinstate women as full participants in the history of arms and armour, addressing their prior absence from institutional narratives head-on. It reflects a wider move over the last few decades by museums to diversify their narratives of conflict and expand the range of groups featured in their programming.¹⁵ It must be stressed that acquiring individual objects or developing innovative exhibitions represent a small step in the laborious process of rehabilitating neglected chapters of the past. Nonetheless, it shows that where there is the will, the means, and an enduring legacy, museums are able to retrieve certain overlooked experiences of conflict from apparent cultural oblivion. They are constantly in dialogue with the concept of forgetting, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by the surviving fragments of historical memory.

Museums are not only beholden to precedent in their approach to forgetting, they have to be just as aware of contemporary concerns. As the example of the UK Government has already shown, the potency of cultural memory prompts the intervention of external parties in its mobilisation. This form of compulsion operates to varying degrees of success in affecting museums' treatment of conflict. In 2021, the Armouries was criticised by historians affiliated with the History Reclaimed group for undertaking a review into its displays of policing equipment in the wake of Colston's fall and the wider Black Lives Matter protests.¹⁶ Against this febrile backdrop, the possibility that its staff might revise existing narratives was enough

¹³ Jennifer Tucker and others, 'Display of Arms: A Roundtable Discussion about the Public Exhibition of Firearms and Their History', *Technology and Culture*, 59 (2018), 719-69 (p. 768).

¹⁴ Royal Armouries, 'Body Armour - Enhanced Pico Integrated Carrier Female Body Armour (2018)' <<https://collections.royalarmouries.org/object/rac-object-139675.html>> [accessed 13 July 2022].

¹⁵ Barton C. Hacker, and Margaret Vining, 'Military Museums and Social History', in *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*, ed. by Wolfgang Muchitsch (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), pp. 41-60 (pp. 51-52).

¹⁶ Craig Simpson, 'Royal Armouries' Police Equipment Displays "Could Be Offensive"', *Telegraph*, 23 January 2021 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/01/23/royal-armouries-police-equipment-displays-could-offensive/>> [accessed 4 July 2022].

to evoke fears of cultural erasure. The institutional defence against this charge was that the review would seek to provide a more complete history of these collections rather than purposefully forgetting it. In the event, this criticism had a limited impact on the Armouries' operations, but it does highlight the persuasiveness of the argument that the more contentious aspects of conflict are best left forgotten by museums. This heightened potential for controversy is by no means confined to the Armouries. In 1995, a public outcry forced the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC to cancel and later replace an exhibition of the *Enola Gay* that emphasised the human suffering the aircraft inflicted when it dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.¹⁷ As an example of an object's traumatic associations being set aside in favour of a more celebratory narrative, this episode underscores the conflicting legacies that are so often ingrained in the material remnants of conflict. The pressure on museums to forget the more troubling aspects of these holdings can thus be overwhelming at times. However, the fact that it is still possible to discuss this episode suggests a more complex aftermath. The more ambivalent iteration of the *Enola Gay* exhibition may have been withdrawn under external pressure, yet critical analysis of this polarising incident has ultimately continued. The persistent nature of memory, whether embodied in tangible objects or intangible ideas, can only be overcome through systematic efforts. The challenging legacies of conflict may therefore be silenced temporarily under external duress but are seldom forgotten completely.

It is true that attempts to compel museums of conflict to forget particular details rarely result in total erasure, but there are certain circumstances where this outcome is unavoidable. Given the sensitivities surrounding their collections and wider subject matter, they are often subject to greater statutory obligations than other museums. English weapons law, for example, requires articles passing through law enforcement custody to be stripped of any identifying data before re-entering circulation, leaving museums to understand these decontextualised collections as best as they can. The Armouries has faced this challenge when weapons have entered its collection through police amnesties, most notably following the introduction of stricter firearms legislation in 1988 and 1997.¹⁸ No details about an amnestied object's past before its surrender can be passed onto a recipient museum. The Armouries' online record for a relinquished Luger pistol is typical in its brevity: 'Transferred to the Royal Armouries via the National Museums Consortium from the Home Office

¹⁷ Douglas R. Dechow and Anna Leahy, 'Not Just the Hangars of World War II: American Aviation Museums and the Role of Memorial', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 49 (2006), 419-34 (p. 430).

¹⁸ House of Commons, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates: The Official Report* (19 June 1989, vol. 155, col. 4W) (London: Hansard); House of Commons, 19 January 2000, vol. 342, col. 464W.

Firearms Compensation Scheme, 1997'.¹⁹ This object's biography prior to its renunciation has effectively been obliterated. The legal obligation to protect the identity of a weapon's donor overrides the professional expectation to record its origins for posterity. The Armouries has to start afresh with these objects, even though any information about their provenance could greatly enrich institutional understanding of them. In this specific instance, the need to forget is seen to take precedence over that of remembering. When forgetting is buttressed by legal force – a common occurrence where the material legacy of conflict is concerned – the Armouries and its peers have little choice but to acquiesce.

If the situation was not already complex enough, there are certain instances where museums themselves mobilise forgetting to serve specific ends. Developing a sensitive portrayal of conflict in particular often relies on the museum omitting some of the more challenging aspects of its history. Exploring the workings of memorial museums, Paul Williams has identified the fundamental difficulty of providing an accurate representation of uncomfortable subjects while also accommodating visitor sensitivities.²⁰ This need for compromise does not just apply to memorial museums, but any institution that exhibits collections of a potentially distressing nature. The Armouries' galleries on war, for example, show little sign of 'the history of blood, guts, misery, and despair' intrinsic to combat.²¹ Instead, its interpretative approach focuses on the material development of weapons over their use, a consequence of its specific designation as a museum of arms and armour. The promotion of its newly unveiled 'Firefight: The Second World War' gallery display, for example, emphasises the prominence of the combatants' weapons and strategies, but makes no mention of the resulting casualties.²² This mode of exhibition is not unique to the Armouries. James Scott has identified 'sanitised' presentation as one of the main archetypes of war in museums, characterised by an aesthetic or technological focus that circumvents their problematic origins.²³ What is sanitisation if not a way of forgetting difficult aspects of cultural heritage? This is not meant as a criticism, despite the term's uneasy association with the whitewashing of history. It would surely be much more difficult for the Armouries to

¹⁹ Royal Armouries, 'Centrefire Self-loading Pistol - Luger P08' <<https://collections.royalarmouries.org/object/rac-object-52715.html>> [accessed 13 July 2022].

²⁰ Paul Williams, 'Memorial Museums and the Objectification of Suffering', in *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum*, ed. by Janet Marstine (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), pp. 220-35 (p. 221).

²¹ Ralf Raths, 'From Technical Showroom to Full-Fledged Museum: The German Tank Museum Munster', in *Does War Belong in Museums*, ed. by Muchitsch, pp. 83-98 (p. 88).

²² Royal Armouries, 'War Gallery' <<https://royalarmouries.org/visit-us/royal-armouries-museum/royal-armouries-museum-galleries/war-gallery/>> [accessed 14 June 2022].

²³ James Scott, 'Objects and the Representation of War in Military Museums', *Museum and Society*, 13 (2015), 489-502 (p. 494).

fulfil its public role without some form of self-effacement. After all, its institutional policy commits it to making its programming ‘accessible and comprehensible [to] as many people as possible’.²⁴ As this includes children and young people, it would hardly be appropriate for the Armouries to show the graphic consequences of its weapons collections in full. Few would censure this form of exclusion, undertaken to inform society of the influential role of conflict while insulating more vulnerable individuals from its worst excesses. This does raise an important question: on what grounds is it admissible to omit, or indeed forget, controversial aspects of cultural heritage? In practice, it depends on a variety of criteria: the mode of forgetting, the subject discussed, the objects involved, the proposed justification, the institutional mission, the target audience, the cultural landscape, an observer’s convictions, and so on. In short, there is no single answer. When interpreting conflict, museums therefore have to maintain a fine balance between their obligation to recognise the powerful narratives embodied in its material remnants and the need to efface their most traumatic aspects. The challenge lies in finding an acceptable equilibrium.

Should Museums Forget?

‘Through their collections, museums sanctify some forms of remembering, yet also endorse forgetting.’²⁵ With this incisive observation, Gaynor Kavanagh pinpoints the contradiction endemic to their very existence. Museums are undoubtedly complicated places, so it follows that their relationship with memory is hardly straightforward. The place of forgetting within these institutions is especially ambiguous, not least because it seems to contradict everything they should represent as foundations dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage. This article has sought to demonstrate that the reality is more nuanced. Forgetting impacts on the ability of museums to fulfil their functions in complex ways. This is particularly evident in the case of museums associated with the legacy of conflict, like the Armouries in its role as the UK’s national museum of arms and armour. In addition to the forms of forgetfulness experienced by all museums, its more challenging holdings engender a number of distinct modes of forgetting. Firstly, it can be inadvertent, such as the Armouries’ unconscious prioritisation of certain narratives over others as a result of lingering assumptions in the wider study of conflict. Then, there is forgetting as an external imposition, manifested more or less

²⁴ Royal Armouries, ‘Access Policy’ <<https://royalarmouries.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Royal-Armouries-Access-Policy.pdf>> [accessed 15 June 2022] (p. 2).

²⁵ Gaynor Kavanagh, *Dream Spaces: Memory and the Museum* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), p. 173.

successfully through public criticism and legal obligation. Finally, forgetting can be a purposeful choice, reflected in the omission of ‘blood, guts, misery, and despair’ from the Armouries’ gallery spaces. Few aspects of collections practice in museums escape the consequences of forgetting entirely unscathed. The Armouries’ experience of forgetting also underscores the varied manifestation of this phenomenon in a museum context. This fluidity is rooted in the very meaning – or, more appropriately, meanings – of the word ‘forget’. Forgetting can be construed as both active, a means ‘to remove the traces of conflict, failure and disaster’, and passive, a ‘naturally occurring process which museums disturb’.²⁶ The inherent duality of the term means that it can be applied to a range of otherwise disparate actions and developments. In the case of museums, whose work with material collections is intended to foster remembering, a complex relationship with forgetting is surely the logical counterpoint. However forgetting is conceptualised, contemporary institutions have to come to terms with the powerful influence it exerts on their operations.

It is one thing to acknowledge the impact of forgetting on museum practice, but it is quite another for institutions to embrace its potential. Museums may ‘endorse forgetting’ through their actions, but is it appropriate for them to actively harness it? This is a contentious subject, especially so in the wake of Colston’s fall and increasingly strident calls for museums to tackle issues of social justice.²⁷ Despite this turbulent backdrop, forgetting will likely play a significant role in their future operations, especially if they intend to thrive in today’s dynamic and interconnected world. The constructive repatriation of objects removed under colonial rule, for example, relies on the mutual acknowledgement of distinct cultural traditions of memory practiced by museums and source communities to underpin the work of reconciliation.²⁸ Sometimes, the best way to proceed is to start afresh. It is paramount, however, that museums approach all instances of forgetting with caution. Given the diversity in the mission, scale, and subject of these institutions, seeking a definitive blueprint for success is essentially futile. Even so, there are certain basic tenets that all museums would be wise to heed. Firstly, there needs to be a clear justification for initiating any process of forgetting. The exclusion of the most distressing aspects of conflict from the Armouries’ public galleries on the grounds of catering to the widest possible audience serves as an instructive example. Forgetting should also be proportional to the proposed outcome. If

²⁶ Susan A. Crane, ‘The Conundrum of Ephemerality: Time, Memory, and Museums’, in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. by Sharon Macdonald (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), pp. 98-109 (pp. 100, 107).

²⁷ *Museum Activism*, ed. by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019) p. i.

²⁸ Rodney Harrison, ‘Forgetting to Remember, Remembering to Forget: Late Modern Heritage Practices, Sustainability and the “Crisis” of Accumulation of the Past’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 19 (2013), 579-95 (p. 589).

a museum destroyed a large swathe of its holdings, for instance, it would likely be criticised for dereliction of duty, even if it advanced a compelling reason for doing so. Likewise, any institutional use of forgetting should be thoroughly considered, as an action that is nigh-on impossible to reverse. There have been numerous instances of museum disposal that have resulted in the permanent ‘loss’ of objects whose full significance was only realised long afterwards.²⁹ Finally, any decision to forget should be a collaborative endeavour, acknowledging the current expectation for museums to be inclusive in their decision-making processes. Forgetting in the course of routine institutional operations should occasion wide-ranging internal conversations as a minimum, while more high-profile cases should involve consultation with other museums, representative bodies, and public stakeholders. It is no coincidence that institutions have been censured when their actions have blatantly disregarded professional opinion, as with the Sekhemka statue sale. By observing these general principles in their approach to forgetting, museums should be better equipped to negotiate its many intricacies. Forgetting is ultimately a useful tool in their arsenal, if one that institutions are often reluctant to wield for fear of the possible backlash. When used appropriately it can help museums better respond to the needs of contemporary audiences by reducing the burden of obsolescence. Museums do not have the power to preserve everything. Surely the next best option is allowing them the scope to make informed decisions about what they should seek to remember and what can permissibly be forgotten.

²⁹ Janet Ulph, ‘Dealing with UK Museum Collections: Law, Ethics and the Public/Private Divide’, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 22 (2015), 177-204 (p. 180).