

Preface to the 2018 Edition

This book was originally going to be a single essay in a collection of my writings eventually published by the Duke University Press under the title *Wrestling with Diversity* (2003). But as I was revising it, in 1998, it became longer and longer, precisely because more facets of the general topic, that is, what I was to call in the subtitle of the book *Public Monuments in Changing Societies*, revealed themselves. I was delighted in 1998 that Miriam Angress, my editor at the Press, agreed to liberate the essay from the wider collection and to publish it separately. I am delighted to note that Duke has kept the book in print and that it apparently continues to be used in a number of courses dealing with “public history” and the role that monuments play in shaping versions of such history. So I was equally delighted almost twenty years later when Miriam proved receptive to my suggestion, sometime in the early spring of 2017, that the Press bring out a twentieth anniversary edition with a new afterword discussing some of the developments over the two decades. We agreed that I would hand in around five thousand or so words sometime in August, with publication anticipated in the spring

of 2018. Instead, I submitted the approximately seventeen thousand words that now comprise the new afterword in November (and added to it at the copyediting stage in May 2018) because of the remarkable events throughout 2017 and thereafter!

There is no reason to believe that the interest in public monuments and other public symbols will abate, whether one refers only to our own country or many other countries abroad. As indicated in the afterword, Cecil Rhodes, a primary figure in the spread of the British Empire at the end of the nineteenth century—as well as the eponym of the world-renowned Rhodes Scholarships—is the center of contemporary disputes about memorialization in both the United Kingdom and South Africa. And only recently the city of Osaka, Japan threatened to cancel its status as a “sister city” of San Francisco because of the decision of that city’s leaders to erect a monument to the Korean “comfort women” who served basically as sexual slaves to the Japanese armed forces during World War II.

Even if one agrees that one can engage in genuine debate about constructing *new* monuments, like those to the comfort women, one often hears (or perhaps asserts) that whatever is currently standing should remain so. To tear it down (or even simply to remove it from a place of public honor to, say, a museum for more detached and perhaps critical study) is to engage in the illegitimate “rewriting of history.” When asked to offer a sound-bite summary of the theme of *Written in Stone*, I suggested that it both asks and attempts to answer the question: “Is it Stalinist to tear down statues of Stalin?” After all, the power of the term “Stalinist” comes from the accurate perception that Josef Stalin was a truly evil man who does not deserve public

honor but nonetheless received much of it in the old Soviet Union—and there are some today who wish to restore his place of honor in Russian history. Is it emulating or justifiably criticizing Stalin to destroy his statues?

Much of what follows addresses such arguments, but it may be useful, especially for some younger readers of this book who have no active memory of the initial events of the Iraqi War of 2003, to note that almost literally the first thing that U.S. forces did upon conquering Baghdad in April 2003 was to participate in the obliteration of the statue of Saddam Hussein that had been a dominant part of the public landscape in that city for some years. The “actual” Hussein was not captured until December 13, 2003, and he was not executed until three years later. It is clear, however, that taking down the statue was a deeply significant act for both the conquerors and the conquered. Perhaps what is most relevant to one of the central themes of the book is that no one in the United States publicly objected to this undoubtedly destructive act. No one argued that it constituted an illegitimate effacement of an important, albeit relatively short, part of Iraqi history.

Perhaps it would have been better had the American soldiers waited several days until it was unequivocally clear that the statue’s removal was an act of Iraqis themselves and not interpretable simply as American triumphalism. But even if one opposed the Iraq War itself (as I did), one could still rejoice in the statue’s removal insofar as opposition was based on pragmatic considerations (which, alas, turned out to be vindicated) and not at all on the view that Saddam Hussein was merely a “benevolent despot” who merited remaining in office. There

was basically universal agreement that Saddam Hussein *was* a tyrant who deserved neither office nor public honor; as much to the point is that no one (at least within the United States) suggested that the statue should simply be moved to a museum where it could be studied by scholars and seen by museum-goers. Does that represent simply the extent to which we were blinded to our own self-righteous destruction or, instead, an altogether correct response to the presence of an oppressive symbol of an abominable tyrant?

xiv Given that this edition of the book was being revised almost literally as it was going to press for final publication (including the addition of new photographs), I am confident that it does not constitute the last word on the actual controversies that have become part of our contemporary political scene. Indeed, only in the last several months we have become far more self-conscious about the degree to which otherwise respected public figures engaged in unacceptable sexual harassment or outright assault. How many university buildings, concert halls, or other such venues will face pressure to change their names and cease honoring persons who engaged in such outrageous conduct? Although this book, and the new afterword, focuses on issues raised especially by honoring Confederate “heroes,” the implications obviously go well beyond such specific examples.

I began the original edition by quoting Robert Lowell’s famous poem “For the Union Dead” and his comment that particular monuments and other efforts at memorialization, whatever their original purpose or popularity, can become the equivalent of “fishbones in the throat” of the communities they inhabit. One can have no doubt that this has become ever more

true, and that we will continue to have to figure out how to respond to the presence of such fishbones and the discomfort they engender. I continue to hope that this book, including the new afterword, can play a constructive role at the very least in suggesting the questions that need to be asked and how we might go about answering them in a way that preserves civil peace instead of simply exacerbating our already overheated politics.