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BRITAIN'S IDYLIC COUNTRY HOUSES REVEAL A DARKER HISTORY

Great estates are among the country's treasures. But their connections to slavery and colonialism are forcing visitors to reckon with myths they may not want to abandon.

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The National Trust has identified ninety-three of its estates as having links to the country's colonial and slaveholding past. Illustration by Michael Kennedy



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Dyrham Park, an English country estate nestled among steep hills seven miles north of Bath, fulfills your fantasy of what such a place should be. A house and a dovecote were recorded on the site in 1311. The deer park was enclosed during the reign of Henry VIII. The mansion that you see today is a mostly Baroque creation: long, symmetrical façades, looking east and west; terraces for taking the air; eighteenth-century yew trees, an orangery, a church, fascinating staircases, a collection of Dutch Masters. According to “The Buildings of England: Gloucestershire,” published in 1970, Dyrham Park constitutes “the perfect setting; English country house and church.” The house was a location for the movie of “The Remains of the Day.”

On the second floor is the Balcony Room, which affords fine views of the gardens. The room, once an intimate place to sit and drink tea or coffee with visitors, is wood-panelled. It has exquisite brass door locks. The fireplace holds a collection of seventeenth-century delftware, above which hangs a museum-quality Dutch painting of ornamental birds, by a court artist to William III. Facing into the room, with their backs to the wall, are two statues of kneeling Black men with rings around their necks.

The slave figures hold scallop shells over their heads. These were probably filled with rosewater, so guests could wash their hands. The stands were acquired by William Blathwayt, the owner and principal builder of Dyrham Park, shortly before 1700. Contemporary accounts describe him as a dull, efficient man, “very dextrous in business,” who acquired knowledge, jobs, and an ability to make things happen. At one point, Blathwayt simultaneously served as the secretary of state, the secretary of war, and the auditor of the nation’s nascent imperial accounts. Between 1680 and his death, thirty-

seven years later, Blathwayt helped to administer the rapidly growing slave-based sugar and tobacco economies of England's Caribbean and American colonies.

He became very rich. Blathwayt's uncle and benefactor, Thomas Povey, who had been instrumental in the conquest of Jamaica, in 1665, was a member of the Royal African Company, which then held a monopoly on the supply of slaves to the colonies. Blathwayt's family connections and multiple offices made him a natural conduit for commercial opportunities: beaver trading in Massachusetts, silver mining in South Carolina, human trafficking in the West Indies. During the renovation of Blathwayt's country house, his deputies and contacts overseas were eager to send him exotic hardwoods, along with plants for the garden, deer from north Germany, and Carrara marble for his tomb—anything, as one official wrote, to enhance “the beauty of your paradise at Dirham.”

Povey, an aesthete with money troubles, sent the kneeling statues to Blathwayt. They were probably made in London, inspired by Venetian “blackamoor” art, but they are unquestionably depictions of enslaved men, in idealized page's costumes, with gilt chains tumbling from their right ankles. Together with the delftware—Blathwayt's first posting was to The Hague—and a Javanese tea table in the middle of the room, they served as symbols of his career and colonial prowess. They have knelt in the same place for more than three hundred years.

In 1956, Dyrham Park was bought by the state and given to the National Trust, Britain's foremost conservation charity. It opened to visitors a few years later. People rarely asked or talked about the stands. In 2007, Shawn Sobers and Rob Mitchell, filmmakers and cultural researchers, visited Dyrham Park with around twenty members of the Bath Ethnic Minority Senior Citizens Association. Sobers and Mitchell had been asked by the National Trust to bring racially diverse groups to three properties in the southwest of England, where they explored the visitors' reactions, as part of a series of projects to mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade.

Sobers, who is Black, grew up in Bath, close to Dyrham and eleven miles inland from Bristol, which was Britain's main slave-trading port during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Between 1698 and 1807, some twenty-one hundred slaving voyages departed from the city—one every nineteen days. In two and a half centuries, British ships and merchants trafficked a total of more than three million African people, mostly to the colonies of the New World. The “triangular trade” involved exchanging British-made products for people in West Africa, selling enslaved Africans in the colonies, and then

importing cotton, sugar, tobacco, and other goods produced by slaves. Sobers is a professor at the University of the West of England, in Bristol. He was accustomed to learning that some of his favorite landmarks or stretches of the English countryside were tainted, in some way, by a connection to the former slave economy. He had never been to Dyrham before. When he arrived with the rest of the group, which was mostly made up of older Caribbean women, they joined a tour of the house. “We didn’t have a special tour just for us, but the tour guide knew we were there,” he recalled. “Because we were a very visible group, do you know what I mean?”

The National Trust, which was founded in 1895, relies on thousands of volunteers, mostly white retirees, to show visitors its properties. Dyrham Park has a roster of around a hundred and twenty. When Sobers and his group entered the Balcony Room, they came face to face with the slave stands and stood there, listening politely. “I couldn’t believe it. I really couldn’t believe it was happening,” Sobers told me. “And the tour guide talked about every single thing in that room, you know, talked about *everything* for a good ten, fifteen minutes and not once mentioned it.” A rope cordons off most of the Balcony Room, so visitors stand on a narrow walkway, facing the stands. There is nowhere else to look. “There wasn’t even a kind of a, you know, ‘Yeah, we don’t know what those are. . . .’ There wasn’t even an explaining it away,” Sobers said. “They just acted as if they just weren’t there at all.”

Downstairs, the group paused in the Great Hall to look at portraits of the Blathwayt family. Blathwayt’s wife, Mary Wynter, was descended from George and William Wynter, brothers who

bought Dyrham in 1571. The two were privateers and investors in some of England's earliest known slave-trading voyages. The ceiling of the Great Hall is decorated with paintings commissioned by William Beckford, a plantation owner from Jamaica, who served twice as mayor of London and owned three thousand slaves. One member of Sobers's group, a woman in her seventies named Daisy Ottway, had been researching her family tree in Barbados. But after she went back a few generations the records had petered out. Her own history was irretrievable. As Ottway gazed at the portraits on the wall, her eyes filled with tears.

In September, 2020, Dyrham Park was one of ninety-three historic houses identified by the National Trust as having links with Britain's colonial and slaveowning past—about a third of its collection. (The National Trust owns properties in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland; it has a sister organization in Scotland.) Other heritage groups had carried out similar audits years earlier, usually with a focus on transatlantic slavery, but the Trust, arriving late to the subject, chose to adopt a sweeping approach. In a hundred-and-fifteen-page “interim report,” the charity listed houses connected to abolitionists as well as to slaveowners, along with generals, civil servants, businesspeople, politicians, and artists whose lives were in some way entwined with Britain's four-hundred-year saga of colonial rule, which touched every continent, including Antarctica.

Bateman's, the Jacobean home of Rudyard Kipling, in East Sussex, made the list. So did Chartwell, Winston Churchill's family house, in Kent. The brief entry about Chartwell acknowledged Churchill's “exceptionally long, complex, and controversial life,” but noted his opposition to Indian independence and the fact that the Bengal famine of 1943, in which some three million people died, occurred while he was Prime Minister. “We're not here to make judgements about the past,” John Orna-Ornstein, the Trust's director of culture and engagement, wrote in a blog post to accompany the report. “We're presenting information based on research, allowing people to explore and draw conclusions for themselves.”

For many historians, including the Trust's team of curators, the decision to publicly explore its properties' colonial connections had been a long time coming. “Massively important, massively overdue,” one curator told me. Since the nineties, scholars of the English country house have increasingly challenged its status as a quiet place of veneration—an idyll from a benign and gently ordered past—and sought to recast the properties as instruments of power, display, and self-invention.

Researchers of Britain's colonial history also welcomed the charity's decision to consider the legacies of slavery and empire alongside each other. For more than two centuries, the transatlantic slave trade coexisted with a busy period of expansion in other parts of the world, notably in Asia. Nonetheless, the subjects usually occupy distinct places in the public imagination—a splitting that has helped to preserve a thick vein of imperial nostalgia in Britain. A poll last year found that thirty-two per cent of British adults are proud of the Empire; among the other European countries surveyed, only the Dutch recorded a higher percentage. “There’s an interesting understanding of what slavery was and what the colonization of Asia was,” Olivette Otele, a history professor at the University of Bristol, told me. (Indenture, a form of bonded labor under which more than a million Indian workers were transported around the Empire, lasted well into the twentieth century.) Of Britain's Asian conquests, Otele said, “You think about the fabric, you think about the grandeur, you think about the beauty, the jewelry. Most people think that it was prettier, in a way. Whereas slavery is Black bodies, transported and trafficked and all that. So they don't want to link those histories, because it forces them to see the ugliness behind the Asian colonization as well.”

The popular reaction to the Trust's report was generally hostile. The preparation and release of the audit coincided with the murder of George Floyd and a wave of Black Lives Matter-inspired protests around statues and other contested sites of memory. Conservative critics of the Trust saw the project as the latest in a catalogue of woke delinquencies, at odds with its founding purpose and with its millions of aging members—a clash between “the trendies” and “the tweedies,” according to the British press. In 2017, the Trust explored L.G.B.T.Q. histories of its properties; in 2018, it celebrated a hundred years of women's suffrage. A leaked internal document suggested that the charity should “flex its mansion offer” in search of new audiences. The impact of the pandemic, which closed hundreds of historic sites to visitors and led to more than a thousand job losses at the Trust, magnified the sense of a venerable institution losing its way. On August 23rd of last year, the organization tweeted in support of UNESCO's International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Its Abolition, and was hit by a wall of abuse from its members.

“I'll tell you when the iron entered my soul,” Charles Moore, a former editor of the *Daily Telegraph* and the Trust's current chief antagonist in the British media, told me. “It was after George Floyd, because then I could see what was going on. The Trust reacted by endorsing B.L.M.” Moore regards B.L.M. as a “semi-racist political movement with extraordinary doctrines who love, among other

things, knocking down statues.” He added, “The idea that our greatest conservation body should be, as it were, taking the knee to them seemed absolutely dreadful.”

Last November, Conservative Members of Parliament organized a debate in Westminster about the future of the National Trust, in which Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government was asked to intervene. Moore is also a former editor of *The Spectator*, a job that Johnson later held. When we met, Moore described England’s stately homes as places of refuge and relaxation for millions of people. “I think comfort does matter,” he told me. “I know, people say that ‘oh, we must be uncomfortable. . . .’ Why should I pay a hundred quid a year, or whatever, to be told what a shit I am?”

The dispute has cast the National Trust as an ungainly participant in an English culture war. (The same tensions do not seem to hold in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, partly because some people view them as colonies themselves.) “We are the least woke people I can imagine,” a manager of two castles told me. Faced with a concerted attack by the conservative press, abetted by the government, the charity has not given up on telling the full histories of its properties, but it hasn’t mounted a spirited defense of the practice, either. In May, the Trust’s chair, a business-turnaround specialist named Tim Parker, who worked for Johnson when he was the mayor of London, announced that he would step down. When I asked Orna-Ornstein to explain why the charity had chosen to investigate the legacies of slavery and empire jointly, he laughed ruefully. “Did we make the right decision to combine them in that report? I don’t know,” he said. “I think I may have been naïve.”

It is not easy to encapsulate the precise role played by the National Trust in English public life. In 1985, Patrick Wright, a critic of the country’s burgeoning heritage industry, described it as “an ethereal kind of holding company for the dead spirit of the nation.” Since then, the charity’s membership has risen fourfold, to 5.6 million people, more than the population of the Republic of Ireland. In theory, the National Trust exists to preserve places “of beauty or historic interest.” In practice, it fulfills at least two large and subtly conflicting roles, as a custodian of collective memory and as a purveyor of weekend leisure. The Trust aims for total inclusion. Its slogan is “For everyone, for ever.” The charity’s Visitor Experience teams divide the twenty-six million people who go to its houses, gardens, and extensive nature reserves in a normal year into nine categories and make sure that there is something for all of them. The Trust hates to disappoint people. It hates, like any great British institution, to cause offense.

Before the pandemic, Dyrham Park received some two hundred and seventy thousand visitors a year, of whom about half went inside the house. When I visited recently, there was a shuttle bus from the parking lot, down the steep and twisting drive. A sign pointed to the house, garden, shop, and tearoom. Visitors were encouraged to look out for pied wagtails and buzzards, circling above the park, and urged not to pick the black Worcester pears, which were growing in trees espaliered against the stable walls. A mother was breast-feeding her baby in the formal garden. I saw a single Black visitor. I was shown around by Eilidh Auckland, Dyrham's curator, and Rupert Goulding, who helps lead curatorial research at the Trust. I asked why most people came to Dyrham Park; they both replied immediately, "A nice day out."

Goulding spent several years tracing the various timbers used in Blathwayt's construction of the house. At one point, he and Auckland led me into a gloomy set of rooms that were closed to visitors because of a shortage of volunteers, to show me a painting of a cocoa plantation. We walked past Dyrham's state bed, commissioned by Blathwayt for the most esteemed visitors (he hoped, one year, for a visit from Queen Anne), which towered to the ceiling, its gold-and-silk fabrics in a poor state of repair. It would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds to restore. "This bed, I think, symbolizes Blathwayt's ambition," Goulding said. "We have to try and conserve it." A moth flew out. Auckland clapped her hands to crush it.

Goulding was on furlough last spring when he was recalled to work on the Trust's colonialism report. For years, he and Auckland had been trying to link the story of Dyrham to Blathwayt's career. In 2015, the orangery started serving spicy hot chocolate, to evoke the house's Caribbean connections.

“You can’t understand Dyrham if you don’t understand the links to Virginia, and Barbados, and Jamaica, and places like that,” Goulding said. “This place embodies those links.” So why had acknowledging that past gone down so badly with the visiting public? Goulding seemed politely crestfallen. “It’s very tricky, isn’t it?” he replied. “I suppose people feel that something—I guess they feel that something of them is disappearing.”

The National Trust, more than any other institution, helped to create the idealized version of the English country house. Almost every historian I spoke to supported the charity’s decision to reinterpret its properties, but many also observed that it did not have a choice. “They didn’t decide to do those changes out of the graciousness of their hearts,” Otele said. “The National Trust was known by all minority communities as a white environment that was hostile—silently hostile—to people, simply in absentia.”

Given Britain’s changing demographics and the weight of recent decades of colonial history, the elisions of the past were no longer tenable. The National Trust has been forced to explode a myth of its own making. But many English people preferred the myth as it was. “It’s the country’s reputation—period drama, Churchill, country houses. So when you touch those things, it’s incredibly disheartening,” Otele said.

On July 19, 1934, the eleventh Marquess of Lothian addressed the annual general meeting of the National Trust, at the Inner Temple, in London. Lothian, a noted appeaser of Adolf Hitler, had inherited four country houses a few years earlier and could not afford to keep them. Between 1894 and 1930, inheritance taxes on Britain’s landed estates had risen from eight per cent to fifty per cent. For the first time in several centuries, the country’s aristocracy and great landowners struggled to pass on their magnificent houses and gardens. Lothian came to the Trust with an idea: that entire estates, intact with their furniture and paintings, could be left to the charity—and later opened to the visiting public—instead of breaking them up to pay the taxes. “In Europe there are many magnificent castles and imposing palaces,” Lothian told the Trust, which then had five employees. “But nowhere, I think, are there so many or such beautiful country manor houses and gardens, and nowhere, I think, have such houses played so profound a part in molding the national character and life.”

Lothian's speech led to the creation of the National Trust's celebrated Country House Scheme, through which hundreds of properties were later donated, with endowments for their upkeep, for the benefit of the nation—often with family members staying on as tenants, in a quiet wing. In 1936, the Trust hired James Lees-Milne, an enigmatic and deeply charming man, as the first secretary of the scheme, and his diaries of cycling through the countryside, coaxing dilapidated treasures from the hands of dowagers and elderly baronets, remain an unmatched description of the twilight of the English upper class.

The acquisitions transformed the Trust, which had previously focussed on preserving open land and humbler, historic places while opposing urban sprawl. “We all need space,” Octavia Hill, one of the Trust's three founders, wrote in 1875. “Unless we have it we cannot reach that sense of quiet in which whispers of better things come to us gently.” After the Second World War, the organization became more overtly conservative. It was run almost exclusively by Old Etonians. Membership rose, and grand manors and their art collections went from being totems of an unequal, class-bound society to representing a form of collective cultural achievement.

Saving them became a national pastime, punctuated by moments of panic. In 1974, the Victoria and Albert Museum mounted “The Destruction of the Country House,” a polemical exhibition in which visitors passed through a “Hall of Lost Houses,” where photographs of around a thousand manors, demolished in the twentieth century, were attached to pieces of broken masonry. A tape recording intoned their names. The curators described the country house as “England's unique contribution to the visual arts.” In 1981, the television adaptation of “Brideshead Revisited,” filmed at Castle Howard, in Yorkshire, ached for the vanished lives of aristocrats, their gardens, and their picnics. (Castle Howard remains in private hands, along with at least a thousand other historic houses and castles in Britain—three times the number owned by the National Trust.)

Four years later, the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., staged “The Treasure Houses of Britain”—a show of seven hundred works of art from two hundred country houses—whose insurance costs were partly underwritten by the British government. In the space of five months, almost a million people attended, including the Prince and Princess of Wales. “In all humility,” Gaillard Ravenel, the gallery's chief of design, told the *Washington Post*, “it is the most fabulous exhibition that has ever been done in any museum anywhere in the world.”

For many years, the National Trust's houses were presented as their owners had left them. "Nothing is more melancholy," Lothian argued in 1934, "than to visit these ancient houses after they have been turned into public museums, swept, garnished, dead, lifeless shells, containing no children's voices, none of the hopes and sorrows of family life." The charity had neither the means nor the expertise to do much else. It was also a matter of politeness. Many donors were still alive. "One wouldn't want to write things or present things in a way that they might think was tactless," Merlin Waterson, who worked for the Trust from 1971 to 2004, told me.

Even so, the idea of the country house did not remain entirely static. In 1973, Waterson handled the donation of Erddig Hall, a sixty-five-room mansion outside Wrexham, in Wales. Erddig's last owner, Philip Yorke III, had lived in two rooms, with a small generator, while the estate slowly sank into grounds that had been hollowed out by mining. But the house had an extraordinary collection. Since 1791, the Yorke family had commissioned paintings, and then photographs, of its servants. One of the oldest portraits was of Jane Ebrell, an eighty-seven-year-old housemaid and "spider-brusher" known as "the Mother of us all." Edward Barnes, Erddig's woodman in 1830, was also commemorated in verse: "Long may He keep the Woods in Order, / To weed a walk, or trim a Border."

When Erddig opened to the public, in 1977, the Trust displayed the servants' quarters and the kitchens with as much care as its formal apartments. Waterson oversaw the restoration. "It did make a stir at the time," he recalled. "And that really was because of the way it presented the lives of the people living in the house, and didn't just concentrate on the very fine furniture." You can draw a line from Erddig Hall winning Britain's Museum of the Year prize in 1978 to the success of "Downton Abbey," in the twenty-tens, for their accommodation of class into the story of the country house. Almost every National Trust house now "tells the upstairs-downstairs," as one manager put it, and it is often the most popular part of the visitor experience. "It's the relevance," the manager said. "The average visitor might come and say, 'I'm probably more likely to descend from the chauffeur or the groomsmen than I am to be from the lady.'"

Recognizing the existence of working people on great estates helped to shore up the idea of the country houses as places of shared memory. "Yes, we acknowledge that there are tensions . . . but, ultimately, everyone was on board, because class could be assimilated into the project of Englishness, right?" Priyamvada Gopal, a professor of post-colonial studies at the University of Cambridge, said.

“Race doesn’t allow that.” The spoils of enslavement and colonial power, and how they were fashioned into perfect English settings, posed harder questions, which the Trust took longer to appreciate.

In the two-thousands, a group of researchers at University College London began digitizing the names of nineteenth-century slaveholders. Under the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, the British government had agreed to pay twenty million pounds, the equivalent of forty per cent of its annual budget, to compensate plantation owners, and absentee investors, for the loss of their human property. Dividing the money involved a complex series of simultaneous equations: to work out the price of a driver in Barbados compared with that of an enslaved child in St. Kitts. The British government finished paying off the debt in 2015. Some of the paperwork had already been seen by historians. Eric Williams, a scholar and a former Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, whose book “Capitalism and Slavery,” from 1944, argued that slavery provided the capital to finance the Industrial Revolution, consulted a version of the records in the thirties. But the data had not been properly analyzed. When Nick Draper, a retired banker who led the U.C.L. team, requested the first of six hundred and fifty Treasury files from the National Archives, at Kew, many of the original silk ties around the documents were still in place. “It was clear to me that they hadn’t been touched,” he said.

The Legacies of British Slavery database, which went online in 2013, contained the names of around four thousand slaveholders based in Britain who claimed compensation in 1834. (The project has since grown to trace twelve thousand estates in the Caribbean, the Cape of Good Hope, and Mauritius back to 1763, and some sixty-two thousand owners.) For the first time, there was an accurate—and undeniable—view of the prevalence of slaveholding in Britain at the moment of its abolition. Eighty-seven Members of Parliament (around one in eight) were involved in the compensation process, either directly or as relatives of claimants, along with a quarter of the directors of the Bank of England. The Archbishop of Canterbury received nine thousand pounds for the loss of four hundred and eleven slaves. “We do not maintain that the slave-owners created modern Britain,” Draper, Catherine Hall, and Keith McClelland, the other leaders of the project, wrote. “But we do not think that the making of Victorian Britain can be understood without reference to those slave-owners.”

It was no surprise to see that compensation money—and, by implication, the economic proceeds of slavery before that—had also reached Britain's country estates. In November, 2009, Draper gave a paper at “Slavery and the British Country House,” a conference held at the London School of Economics, estimating that in the eighteen-thirties between five and ten per cent of country houses were occupied by slaveholders. The building of the database coincided with the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade, which had prompted a range of related research projects across the heritage industry. (Sobers and Mitchell presented their work on Dyrham Park at the same conference.) In 2007, the Lascelles family, the aristocratic owners of Harewood House, in Yorkshire, invited historians to study its collection of plantation records and slave registers, from across the West Indies, some of which had been discovered next to a coke boiler. English Heritage, an organization that manages such sites as Stonehenge, commissioned research into thirty-three of its properties with potential links to slavery.

In 2014, Stephanie Barczewski, a professor at Clemson University, in South Carolina, enlarged the field by considering the interaction between estates and the colonial project as a whole. In her book “Country Houses and the British Empire, 1700-1930,” Barczewski estimated that up to one in six manors were bought with the proceeds of imperialism, with at least two hundred and twenty-nine purchased by officials and merchants returning from India.

The National Trust and its leadership were slow to engage with either the slavery or the colonial-research agenda. “We had low-level conversations with them for some years,” Draper recalled. (He retired from the database project two years ago.) “But nothing happened.” Part of the reason was structural. The Trust has always had a small team of central staff, with properties given considerable autonomy—and limited budgets—in order to mount their own exhibitions. The charity’s volunteers tend to have fixed ideas about the stories that they like to tell. It was left up to individual curators, who sometimes worked with external academics, to alter interpretation panels in houses, or to pitch small-scale projects. In 2018, the Trust agreed to host Colonial Countryside, a series of workshops for children and writers at eleven of its properties, led by Corinne Fowler, a professor of post-colonial literature at the University of Leicester. Fowler was assisted by Miranda Kaufmann, a historian who had helped carry out English Heritage’s slavery research, and Katie Donington, who spent six years working on the U.C.L. database.

One of the houses involved in Colonial Countryside was Penrhyn Castle, near Bangor, in North Wales. At the end of the eighteenth century, Richard Pennant, the first Baron Penrhyn, plowed his family’s wealth, which came from sugar plantations in Jamaica, into the Welsh slate industry. Pennant never met or saw the thousand people whom he owned. When his father fell ill, a live turtle was boxed up and sent across the Atlantic to be made into soup to help him feel better. “Why would you not be interested in a story like that?” Fowler asked me, the first time we met, on Zoom. “This is the kind of detail of it that really brings that history to life, but which is also refreshingly unfamiliar.” In November, 2018, the Trust hosted a meeting of researchers to discuss a possible national program that would address its properties’ connections to transatlantic slavery and colonial rule. Kaufmann suggested that the charity start with an audit.

In September, 2019, Fowler was posted to the Trust, where she prepared a survey of the links between its properties and slavery and colonialism. She used already published material and what she learned from the Trust’s curators. “They were aware they weren’t telling the whole story,” she told me. “And they were becoming increasingly worried about it.” Fowler found examples, such as the Trevelyans, of Wallington, in Northumberland, where the same generation of the family owned slaves in Grenada and worked as colonial administrators in Calcutta—with money, ideas, and taste all flowing back to the same English retreat. “The country house is a meeting point,” Fowler said.

Just as the pandemic arrived in Britain, Fowler submitted an initial draft of the survey, giving details of ninety-three National Trust houses with colonial connections, which she regarded as a low estimate. “I thought, God, if this is all that’s known, this is massive,” she said. Curators from across the charity wrote ten contextual chapters to support her findings. Fowler’s much edited audit, which was described as a gazetteer, was appended to the back.

When the Trust published its report, last fall, it was the gazetteer that caught almost all the negative media attention. In *The Spectator*, Moore described the report as a “hit list.” Pictures of Fowler and Donington, who are white, were published in the *Daily Mail*, the influential right-wing tabloid, which trawled through their work and social-media accounts for evidence of anti-colonial views. For weeks, Fowler received threats, e-mails, and letters to her workplace. “I’ve not seen this kind of hostility actually directed at white scholars before,” Gopal said. “It’s something that’s quite familiar to people of color who speak out.”

The Trust seemed wrong-footed by the reaction and sought to calm its members. “Upsetting anyone is of course a matter of regret for me,” Hilary McGrady, the Trust’s chief executive, wrote in a blog post in November. A month later, Orna-Ornstein described Colonial Countryside and other education work as “temporary projects,” which sounded dismissive to the researchers involved. “I was very pissed off,” one told me. “The idea that you can hide behind saying, ‘Don’t worry, it’ll blow over . . . and then we’ll go back to, you know, cream tea and Easter-egg hunts.’” In December, Fowler published “Green Unpleasant Land,” a book about Britain’s colonial landscape, which she had been working on for more than a decade. Her new notoriety helped to drive sales but also insured another round of outraged comment in the right-wing press. “GARDENING has its roots in racial injustice,” the *Daily Mail* reported in disbelief.

“It’s been a master class in understanding the nation, and where the nation is right now,” Fowler said recently, at a National Trust café in the Cotswolds. There were swifts on the wing, families eating egg sandwiches and shortbread at picnic tables around us, and passive-aggressive signs in the loo. Later, Fowler sent me a spreadsheet of abusive comments that appeared under the *Mail* article about her supposed views on gardening. “The DOTR is coming,” a reader with the handle Stormy Freya wrote. “DOTR” is white-supremacist slang for “Day of the Rope.”

At around midnight on June 23, 1757, Robert Clive, a young lieutenant-colonel in the army of the East India Company, sheltered from the rain in a mango grove near the village of Plassey, now known as Palashi, in Bengal, about a hundred miles north of British-controlled Calcutta. Clive was in command of around three thousand soldiers, of whom two-thirds were Indian sepoys, who were settling down for a wet, anxious night. In 1600, Queen Elizabeth had granted the East India Company a monopoly over trade from India and a license, if necessary, to “wage war.” Clive had come to Plassey to confront Siraj-ud-Daula, the hereditary ruler, or Nawab, of Bengal, who had attacked Calcutta the previous summer and whose army vastly outnumbered Clive’s.

The company’s position appeared hopeless. On one side of the mango grove was the Hooghly River; on the other was the Nawab’s army of fifty thousand men: infantry, cavalry, artillery, and elephant drivers. But since Clive had arrived in India, thirteen years earlier, as a clerk for the company, he had distinguished himself—despite a lack of formal military training—as a reckless and skillful soldier, leading night raids and surprise attacks. The next day, a fortuitous downpour extinguished the guns of the Nawab’s army. The company’s soldiers had kept their gunpowder dry under tarpaulin and emerged from the muddy riverbank to win a decisive victory.

A bronze panel showing “Clive in the mango grove on the eve of Plassey” adorns the plinth of his statue, which stands between the Treasury and the Foreign Office, overlooking St. James’s Park, in London. The battle was the start of a breathtaking period of British conquest on the Indian subcontinent. In 1758, Clive became the governor of Bengal, which was the wealthiest part of the Mughal Empire and a major exporter of textiles. By 1803, the East India Company controlled Delhi and had a private army of two hundred thousand, far larger than the King of England’s. For the adventurers and merchants who took part, it was a time of dizzying enrichment. Diamonds, rubies, and gold bars seized after the battle were auctioned off; soldiers received a share of the proceeds, according to their rank. Back in England, Clive bought six country estates and rented a town house in Mayfair. During two spells in India, he became one of the richest self-made men in Europe.

The booty excited moral unease as well as the envy of the “nabobs.” In the early seventeen-seventies, more than a million people, around a fifth of the population of Bengal, starved to death while the company’s tax collectors steadily shipped their dues to London. “A barbarous enemy may slay a prostrate foe; but a civilised conqueror can only ruin nations without the sword,” Alexander Dow, a Scottish playwright and a company officer, wrote. Parliament calculated that company administrators had received more than two million pounds in bribes (more than two hundred million pounds today). Clive, who was by then an M.P., defended himself in Parliament, speaking for two hours. “I stand astonished by my own moderation,” he said of his behavior.

The Clive Collection—an array of Mughal artifacts picked up by Clive and his family—now resides in a museum at Powis Castle, a National Trust property in the Welsh Borders. The collection rivals similar hauls in the Topkapi Palace Museum, in Istanbul, and the Hermitage, in St. Petersburg. Nothing comparable exists in India. In 2014, William Dalrymple, the author of a four-part history of the East India Company, visited the collection at Powis during a break in a history conference. “The Anarchy,” Dalrymple’s volume about the company’s violent rise, which was published in 2019, opens at Powis, describing a painting of Clive receiving the *diwani*—the right to tax the people of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa in perpetuity—from the Mughal emperor Shah Alam II. Dalrymple was startled by the Trust’s genteel presentation of the objects. *Lut*, the Hindi word for plunder, was one of the first Indian words to enter the English language.

Dalrymple likens the Clive Collection to objects seized during the Second World War. “If you were to gather a group of National Trust supporters in a room and say to them, ‘We have some examples here of looted Jewish art treasures taken by the Nazis that have ended up in our properties. Should we hold on to them? Or should we give them back to their owners, who now live in L.A.?’ There would be a hundred-per-cent vote, of course,” he said. “Most British people simply are not aware, or haven’t processed, that the pretty Sunday-night drama they see of ‘Passage to India,’ with ladies in crinoline dresses floating across the lawns, and maharajas playing croquet and smiling elephants swishing their tails in the background—that this is *the same thing*. That this is another conquered nation, whose art treasures now sit in British museums and in British country houses.”

I went to Powis, an eight-hundred-year-old castle, with walls nine feet deep, in June. You enter the Clive Museum through an eighteenth-century ballroom. Two leopard skins hang, very high up, on the walls. Of the thousand or so objects, around three-quarters were acquired by Clive. The rest, including some of the most spectacular items, were obtained by his son, Edward, and daughter-in-law, Henrietta, who followed in his footsteps to India. The vast chintz campaign tent of Tipu Sultan, “the Tiger of Mysore,” who was killed by the East India Company in 1799, is kept in a darkened alcove, to protect it from the light. For many years, the tent was used for garden parties on the castle grounds. A gold tiger’s-head finial, studded with diamonds, emeralds, and rubies, one of eight from Tipu’s throne, is the pride of the collection.

Most of Clive’s treasures are housed in evocative, Mughal-style display cabinets, which were built in the nineteen-eighties. On the day I visited, many of their handwritten labels, which date from that time, had been removed. Remains of the red-and-gold palanquin abandoned by Siraj-ud-Daula at the Battle of Plassey sat in a glass case, unidentified. “Some of the labelling is a bit old-fashioned,” Shane Logan, the general manager, explained. The National Trust has acquired around ninety per cent of the Clive family’s collection, but some of the most valuable objects are occasionally offered for sale by his descendants. In 2004, a Qatari royal bought a jade flask for three million pounds, a flyswatter for eight hundred thousand pounds, and most of Clive’s hookah, which is currently on display at the V. & A. The rest was in a gloomy cabinet at Powis. “The lighting is awful here,” Liz Green, the Trust’s senior curator for Wales, said as we tried to find it.

New information boards had been put up at the entrance to the museum to explain the provenance of the collection. “A significant portion was pillaged,” one board read. Green paused next to it and

pointed at the phrase. “I mean, ‘pillaging?’” she said. “It’s not fair to say that a significant portion was pillaged.” There were eighteenth-century British laws to regulate looting in warfare, but they weren’t exactly enforced. “We might never know for definite,” Green said. “But it’s interesting to think through the weighting of things and all these words.”

Compared with the moral clarity and partial recognition of Britain’s responsibility for slavery, there is much less consensus around every dimension of the nation’s conquests in Asia. Dalrymple, who spends most of the year in India, is descended from East India Company administrators. When he began his first book about the company, “White Mughals,” he hoped that he might be able to tell a somewhat positive story. But the economics proved overwhelming. “At the end of the day, we went to a very, very, very rich country and transferred a lot of its wealth to this country, by trade, entrepreneurship, and looting,” Dalrymple said.

In 2003, Angus Maddison, a British economist, calculated that India’s share of the global G.D.P. went from 24.4 per cent to 4.2 per cent during two and a half centuries of colonial rule. In 1884, the British state had a total income of two hundred and three million pounds, of which more than half came from its overseas territories, including seventy-four million pounds from India. Taxes were levied across the world and sent to burnish the metropole. “It’s not about feelings. It’s not about emotions. It’s not about ideas, or memories. It’s about basic economic facts,” Gurminder K. Bhambra, a professor at the University of Sussex, who studies the colonial global economy, said. “I think that’s possibly what terrifies people. Because if you think about the amount of money that Britain extracted from India, in two centuries, there isn’t enough money in the world today to compensate.”

About five years ago, the team at Powis recognized that the Clive Museum needed an overhaul. In 2018, they convened a series of “Clive Conversations” to educate the castle’s volunteers. “It was about how do we start to talk about what we term ‘difficult history,’ ” Green said. One or two volunteers stopped giving tours. Logan, the manager, was eager to engage with anyone who had a contrary view. “I’ve seen Indian holy men here. Is it because of their pure hatred of Clive?” he said. “Or is it actually because what we’ve got is a cultural touchstone? We are desperate to reach out to these people.” In 2019, the Trust commissioned an artist-in-residence, Nisha Duggal, to work with the collection. One of Duggal’s briefs was to talk to local residents of South Asian heritage about the objects. But she struggled to find any. She ended up calling an Indian restaurant in Welshpool. There is a limit to

what reinterpretation can achieve. I asked Green whether she thought the Clive Collection was in the right place. “That’s a really—” she replied. “It’s a big one. Because I don’t think it’s my decision to say whether it belongs here. It is here.”

Sometimes the legacy of empire is too much to hold. Did you know that Britain invaded Tibet in 1903? Thousands of soldiers were sent into the Himalayas to end the region’s isolation and thwart any ambitions on the part of the Russians. Some three thousand Tibetans were killed —“knocked over like skittles” by British machine guns, according to the memoir of one soldier—and trunks full of painted scrolls, *thankas*, lamas’ robes, and gold crowns were shipped back to Britain. Paintings, weapons, and manuscripts ended up in the British Museum and the Bodleian Library, in Oxford.

I learned about the Tibet expedition in “Empireland,” a recent book by Sathnam Sanghera, a journalist at the London *Times*. Sanghera, a Sikh who grew up in Wolverhampton, compares looking for traces of empire in Britain to identifying eggs baked into a cake. The challenge is magnified when you don’t know the first thing about cooking. Like most people in modern Britain, Sanghera did not learn about the Empire, or slavery, at school. Neither did I. Last year, a survey by the *Guardian* found that fewer than ten per cent of British history students preparing for their G.C.S.E.s (public exams for sixteen-year-olds) were studying colonial history.

The national repression of the Empire shocks many non-Britons, particularly those who grew up in former colonies. “I didn’t realize that there was actually no teaching,” Gopal, the Cambridge professor, who is from India, told me.

England is a land of euphemism, so it’s hard to define how much of this amnesia is conscious or even recent. In the early twentieth century, the Earl of Meath became so worried about people’s ignorance of the Empire that he campaigned for an annual day of celebration. (My local park, in East London, is named after Meath; I had no idea who he was.) However, the politics of the current contest over the country’s history are easier to discern. In 2010, the United Kingdom Independence Party, Nigel Farage’s populist, anti-European Union party, identified slavery and colonialism as fixations of the “British Cultural Left” that were undermining a cohesive society. “The Slavery issue has been deliberately used to undermine Britishness,” the Party’s cultural-policy manifesto read. “The record

needs to be rebalanced.” In 2010, David Cameron’s Conservative government reoriented the history curriculum toward “Our Island Story,” a more upbeat account of Britain’s contribution to the world. (“Our Island Story” is a five-hundred-page children’s history textbook, first published in 1905, which contains four paragraphs about slavery.) “This trashing of our past has to stop,” Michael Gove, the education secretary at the time, said.

The Brexit vote, six years later, was similarly informed by a jingoistic reading of Britain’s past. For many post-colonial scholars, jargon like “Global Britain” and “Empire 2.0” to describe a post-Brexit future meant that a phase of introspection was inevitable. In the U.K., Black Lives Matter catalyzed a form of reckoning that was already under way. “We’re having to figure out, Well, who are we?” Bhabra said. “And one of the easiest tropes to go back to is, Well, we are who we were before we entered the E.U. But, before we entered, Britain was an empire or an empire in the process of dismantling. . . . There’s a residual understanding but a refusal to confront, a refusal to be held accountable for what empire was.”

Under Johnson, who has written a hagiography of Churchill, the partial, positive reading of Britain’s past has only narrowed. Last summer, when the BBC considered dropping a sing-along of “Rule, Britannia!,” an imperial anthem, at a concert, for COVID reasons, the Prime Minister responded, “I think it’s time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions, and

about our culture, and we stopped this general bout of self-recrimination and wetness.” He refers to Britain’s history as a “freedom-loving country” to explain its particular, and mostly grievous, experience of the pandemic.

In July, 2020, around forty Conservative M.P.s, from the pro-Brexit right wing of the Party, formed a new faction called the Common Sense Group, to pressure Johnson to restrict immigration and to combat wokeness. The group’s leader, Sir John Hayes, carries a miniature copy of the poems of Keats in his jacket pocket, and has taken a particular interest in the activities of the National Trust. When we met recently, Hayes claimed to speak for the silent majority, who are members of the Trust, or who go to its properties to escape the strain and diktats of contemporary existence. “They are people who don’t want an analytical deconstruction of Britain’s imperial past,” he told me. “They want something much more generous and gentle.”

Like other critics of the Trust, Hayes cites the aesthetic spirit of Victorian social reformers. “Beauty is always sufficient, isn’t it?” he said. “Beauty is truth, after all.” In the interests of balance, Hayes suggested that the Trust put on an exhibition called “The Glories of Empire.” “But the National Trust would never do that,” he said. “It is deeply prejudiced.” He reminisced about his time as the vice-chairman of the British Caribbean Association, when he got to know lots of Black migrants, many of whom had come as part of the Windrush generation, in the sixties. “They were patriotic people, decent people—people who called their children Milton and Nelson and Gladstone,” Hayes said. “And we didn’t ever talk about politics as such. But they were noble people, actually.”

Last September, the Common Sense Group asked Oliver Dowden, the British culture secretary, to investigate and cancel any public funding of Colonial Countryside and Corinne Fowler, describing the work as “radical projects which disparage our nation and despise the history of its people.” In February, Dowden, who criticized the Trust’s report soon after it appeared, summoned twenty-five heritage organizations to a meeting, and explained that history should not “automatically start from a position of guilt and shame or the denigration of this country’s past.”

Earlier this year, the National Trust was under investigation by the Charity Commission, Britain’s charity regulator, for a possible breach of its purpose. (It was cleared.) A rebel group of National Trust members, called Restore Trust, also came into being. The group’s first demand was the resignation of Parker, the Trust’s chair. The charity’s general meeting, held online late last year, had been deluged

with questions from members about the colonialism report. “We are not members of B.L.M.,” Parker had said, denying that the Trust had been taken over “by a bunch of woke folk.” On May 25th, the day after Restore Trust asked Parker to resign, the charity announced that he would step down in October. The Trust says that the decision had been made earlier.

“People doing impactful work, classroom work, as well as public engagement, are definitely under pressure,” Gopal told me. Gopal is a fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge. Last year, the college announced that it would run a yearlong program of events exploring Winston Churchill, race, and empire. In May, the working group that oversaw the program disbanded after only two seminars, following criticism from Policy Exchange, a conservative think tank, and Nicholas Soames, Churchill’s grandson.

The National Trust is also reconsidering how it handles difficult history. I asked Orna-Ornstein, who is responsible for research at the charity, whether the Trust plans to finalize its “interim” report into the colonial links of its properties. “I don’t know whether or when we’ll publish a full version of the report,” he replied. “And that’s because, at the moment, the report is the story. And that’s not helpful to anybody.”

Since last fall, Orna-Ornstein explained, the Trust had conducted “a season of listening,” talking to its members and people inside and outside the organization, and adopted a new approach, called Total History, that would try not to privilege one type of story over another. Recently, the Trust decided not to support an academic-funding proposal that would have followed up Fowler’s survey of its properties. “I wanted to pause,” Orna-Ornstein told me. “I can see why it feels as though we’re sort of turning away from this, in some sense. I don’t think we are at all.” Visitors will see more signage and information boards at the Trust’s houses about Britain’s colonial history, but not enough to spoil the wonder. “We’ve been part of a particular sense of identity,” he said. “So for us to—not even to question that, but to describe something else, I think it’s very difficult.”

On Christmas Day, 1817, a Unitarian missionary named Thomas Cooper and his wife, Ann, arrived at the Georgia estate, in Hanover, on the northwestern tip of Jamaica. Cooper, who was from Suffolk, had been recruited by a fellow-Unitarian to preach to the five hundred or so slaves who worked on the plantation. When the Coopers returned to England, several years later, they

described what they had seen: children being flogged in the fields; widespread sexual abuse; an atmosphere of moral catastrophe. In one pamphlet, Ann Cooper recounted how the attorney of the estate, George Hibbert Oates, had impregnated a sixteen-year-old girl. Oates was a member of a prominent slaveowning family, which has been extensively researched by Donington and the U.C.L. team. During his life in Jamaica, he fathered at least nine children: four with different enslaved women and five with a free woman of color, Margaret Cross, with whom he lived on his own, smaller estate. When Oates died, in 1837, he left a hundred pounds to each of his “reputed” children, and more to his sons and daughters by Cross.

A boy and a girl were sent to England to live under the care of Oates's sister. She lived on Sion Hill, a fashionable address in Bath. A silhouette from 1840 shows the girl, Mary, who was about seven years old, holding a rose and a small basket. Her relatives were compensated a hundred and three thousand pounds (around seven million pounds today) for the loss of their more than two thousand slaves, including Mary's half siblings, in Jamaica. While her brother trained as a doctor and returned to the Caribbean, Mary stayed in England and moved in polite society. She painted watercolors. She was a child of empire. Crossing the English Channel, in the summer of 1867, Mary described, in a journal, “my first view of a foreign shore,” as she took in Boulogne, although she had been born on a plantation five thousand miles to the west. “It presented many peculiarities to my eyes,” she wrote.

In Bath, Mary got to know the Blathwayt family, of Dyrham Park, who owned a house in town. In 1870, when her aunt died, one of the executors to the will was the Reverend Wynter Thomas Blathwayt, who was a widower. He and Mary married in 1876. Twenty-three years later, when she was in her late sixties, she became the lady of the house.

Photographs of Mary at Dyrham survive. One shows her on the house's western terrace, below the Balcony Room, in a long Victorian dress and lace cap, her face averted from the camera. When I visited Dyrham, I saw some of Mary's possessions, laid out on a table in the library. There was the silhouette, a metal plate for printing her calling cards, her watercolors, and the travel journal. Auckland, the National Trust curator, said that a volunteer had been reading through her correspondence but had hurt his knee and needed time to recuperate. “He's off for six weeks,” she said, sadly. “So it's very slow going.” From what he had read so far, Auckland explained, it looked as if Mary Oates was interested in her family history. ♦