



REDVERS BULLER STATUE IN EXETER

England, United Kingdom

50.7279569, -3.5393398



Image taken by Oliver Anthony, January 30th, 2021

Executive Summary

Following the 2020 Black Lives Matter Protests, the statue of General Redvers Buller was reviewed by the Exeter City Task Force and slated for removal. This was due to Buller's controversial historical role in the South African War (1899-1902). This decision to remove the statue received mixed reactions and spurred a viral *change.org* petition calling for the statue to remain. Despite the petition, the Council decided to proceed with its removal. However, the 2021 'Retain and Explain' Policy of the UK Government overturned this decision. This case study demonstrates the necessity of comprehensive community consultation when addressing controversial historical figures.

Introduction

Following the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, local councils throughout the UK set up task groups to assess the position of colonial-era statues and memorials within their towns and cities. One such impact assessment has been undertaken in the city of Exeter, where a recent equality review undertaken by the City Council suggested that the statue of General Sir Redvers Buller V.C. (1839-1908) should be relocated.

The decision to relocate the statue of Redvers Buller initially received a heavily mixed reception, with a petition appealing against the relocation reaching over 9,000 supporters, only two weeks after the review was made public. Following the 2021 'Retain and Explain' policy of the UK Government, the Council has reversed its decision to relocate the statue and has instead opted to add signage to its base, with the possibility of also removing the contested 'He Saved Natal' etching on the statue's base

Background

General Sir Redvers Buller V.C

The equestrian statue situated on the junction of Hele Road and New North Road, Exeter, was created in honour of General Sir Redvers Buller V.C. on 6 September 1905.¹ The statue was erected despite some criticism from political and military bodies at the time and was unprecedented since Buller himself attended its unveiling.² The statue has since stood for over a century, relatively untouched, albeit the occasional cone placed on its head by pranksters.

In recent years, however, the memorial has taken an increasingly leading role in news articles; some concerning the 'dark cloud'³ that lingers over Buller's military involvements, others directing renewed attention to his courage and bravery.⁴ Instances of vandalism testify to the fact that the statue has been received differently across social groups⁵ leading to community divisions. Discourse pointedly in defense of the statue has blamed students for damage done to it,⁶ despite presenting very little evidence in support of this (although likely spurred on by the fact students are well known for placing a street cone on top of the statue's head).⁷

Buller's statue is therefore divisive on three levels: first, for his involvement in nineteenth-century colonialist expansionism (including the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 and the South African War from 1899-1902). Second, his alleged connection to concentration camps in South Africa during the South African War which resulted in the deaths of thousands. Third, the Statue has fueled a

¹ Peter Donaldson, *Remembering the South African War: Britain and the Memory of the Anglo-Boer War, from 1899 to the Present* (Liverpool: University Press, 2013), 115.

² Lewis Butler, *Sir Redvers Buller* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1909), 102.

³ Howard Lloyd, "The dark mystery surrounding Devon's greatest war hero," *DevonLive*, March 1, 2020.

⁴ BBC, "Inside Out – South West of England," *BBC News*, February 2, 2004.

⁵ RadioExe, "Redvers Buller statue attacked," *RadioExe 107.3 DAB*, January 7, 2019.

⁶ See commentators I and O in Figure 1B and 1C.

⁷ Rom Preston-Ellis, "People are still risking their lives by putting cone on statue that teen fell to his death from," *DevonLive*, April 27, 2020.

present-day schism between students and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, against some local residents who regard the decision to relocate the statue as a form of so-called 'historical wokery'.⁸

When Buller's Statue was first unveiled in 1905, notes of a speech written by Lord Wolseley (who was unable to attend due to illness) were read out by then Lord Lieutenant of the Country, Lord Ebrington, and went as follows:

This statue will remind future generations of Western men of the brilliant services performed by Devonshire's most illustrious son of this period, and cannot fail to inspire them with a desire to serve our Sovereign in their turn as well and as faithfully as Sir Redvers Buller has done throughout his long and brilliant career.⁹

The statue, commissioned by mayor of Exeter, Mr A. E. Dunn, was intended as a visible representation of Buller's bravery as a recipient of a Victoria Cross in 1879 for rescuing Captain C. D'Arcy (amongst others) during the Anglo-Zulu War.¹⁰ Buller's heroism earned him the nickname 'Bayard of South Africa',¹¹ referring to his magical qualities as an equestrian soldier, who was well-respected amongst his men, and earned him the appointment as one of Her Majesty the Queen's *Aides-de-camp*.¹² Within the imperialist ideology of the time, Buller's actions were unsurprisingly received as heroic, as testified to by Dunn's speech where he spoke of the gratitude, and of the pride which all parts of the Empire had for their distinguished countryman.¹³

Buller's second major contribution to imperialist expansion, and to which a great deal of literature has been written, was during the South African War (Also referred to as the Second Boer War or Anglo-Boer War) between 1899-1902. The South Africa war, described at the time as a 'white man's war'¹⁴ was fought primarily between the two independent Boer Republics (formed of Dutch-speakers in the Transvaal and Orange Free State) and the British Empire. It was largely triggered by the discovery of gold mines in the Transvaal, which further exacerbated 'aggressive imperialism'¹⁵ by key British Imperial figures such as Cecil Rhodes, with whom Buller was in acquaintance.¹⁶ When Buller joined the war as Commander-in-Chief on behalf of the British Empire, the forces in Natal under leadership of Sir George White had already been pushed back and were under siege in Ladysmith.¹⁷ Repeated attempts by Buller to re-capture Natal, including at Spion Kop,¹⁸ were unsuccessful. Leading him to inform White that Ladysmith was to be abandoned and that surrender should be sought on the 'best terms available'.¹⁹ It was this decision

⁸ Alexander Ward, "Council is slammed for 'ridiculous and historical wokery' over plans to remove a statue of a British war hero – with official report claiming it 'impacts anybody who does not define themselves in binary gender terms,'" *Daily Mail*, January 11, 2021

⁹ The Observer, "The Statue to General Sir Redvers Buller: Unveiling Ceremony at Exeter," *The Observer (1901- 2003)*, Sep 10, 1905

¹⁰ Lewis Butler, *Sir Redvers Buller* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1909), 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹² *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³ The Observer, "The Statue to General Sir Redvers Buller: Unveiling Ceremony at Exeter," *The Observer (1901- 2003)*, Sep 10, 1905

¹⁴ Elizabeth van Heyningen, "The South African War as Humanitarian Crisis," *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97, no.900: 1002, DOI:10.1017/S1816383116000394.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1005.

¹⁶ Roy Thomas, *Two Generals: Buller and Botha in the Boer War*. (Bloomington: Authorhouse), pp.33

¹⁷ Beckett, Ian. *Buller, Sir Redvers Henry (1839-1908)* (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004), 6

¹⁸ n.a. *The Life and Campaigns of Sir Redvers H. Buller, V.C.* (London: George Newnes Limited, 1900)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

that would later see Buller face criticism from political and military establishments alike.²⁰ Eventually, on 28 February 1900, Buller was able to gain possession of Ladysmith, but not without heavy losses in the process.

Historians have recently directed renewed attention to the treatment of both Boer women and children 'concentrated' in up to forty-five internment camps, as well as the impact upon local Black populations who were swept off their lands and held in sixty-four camps.²¹ It is estimated that approximately 50,000 civilians, the majority being children, were killed as a result.²²

On return to England, Buller was greeted with a rapturous reception,²³ including a meeting with Queen Victoria, and the resumption of his command at Aldershot, Hampshire.²⁴ There is little doubt that Buller was received with regional pride by the average citizen in Exeter, and revered as 'a great military hero'²⁵. Yet, within the War Office and Devon's local councils, his support was certainly not universal.²⁶ The creation of a statue in his namesake was received as a divisive and political move, much as discussions surrounding Buller today are replete with political connotations referring to the effects of his imperialist endeavours.

The Mayor of Exeter, for one, spoke graciously of Buller in his initial announcement of the creation of the statue, but support for Buller was not so openly expressed elsewhere: William Ball, the mayor of Torquay, Lord Morley, the chairman of Devon County Council, and John Kennaway, Conservation MP for Honiton,²⁷ all voiced their distaste for the decision to erect a memorial. Lord Clinton, the Lord Lieutenant of Devon, is quoted as stating he would 'take no part whatever in proceedings which appear to question a decision of the War Department in a matter connected with military discipline',²⁸ although he did later attend the unveiling.

In order to fund the Memorial, Dunn set about collecting funds from subscriptions on regional and national newspapers, of which over £2,000 was raised from 50,000 subscribers.²⁹ Captain Adrian Jones was commissioned to carry out the twelve-month task of casting and preparing the statue which stands fifteen feet tall and shows the General in uniform, holding his Victoria Cross (see Figure 3).³⁰ The Cornish Granite on which the statue is standing was also presented by Lord St. Levan.³¹

The plinth on which the statue stands is further engraved with the following: 'Redvers Buller V.V. C.C.B. C.C.M.C of Downes', 'Erected by his countrymen at home and beyond the seas, 1905'

²⁰ Roy Thomas, *Two Generals: Buller and Botha in the Boer War* (Bloomington: Authorhouse), 223.

²¹ Elizabeth van Heyningen, "The South African War as Humanitarian Crisis," *International Review of the Red Cross* 97, no.900: 1008, DOI:10.1017/S1816383116000394.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Ian Beckett, *Buller, Sir Redvers Henry (1839-1908)* (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, 2004), 7.

²⁴ Lewis Butler, *Sir Redvers Buller* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co.), 96.

²⁵ Roy Thomas, *Two Generals: Buller and Botha in the Boer War* (Bloomington: Authorhouse), 223.

²⁶ Peter Donaldson, *Remembering the South African War: Britain and the Memory of the Anglo-Boer War, from 1899 to the present* (Liverpool: University Press), 117.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁹ The Observer, "The Statue to General Sir Redvers Buller: Unveiling Ceremony at Exeter," *The Observer (1901- 2003)*, Sep 10, 1905

³⁰ Donaldson, Peter, *Remembering the South African War: Britain and the Memory of the Anglo-Boer War, from 1899 to the present* (Liverpool: University Press), 117.

³¹ The Observer, "The Statue to General Sir Redvers Buller: Unveiling Ceremony at Exeter," *The Observer (1901- 2003)*, Sep 10, 1905,

followed by '1859-1900', a list of countries Buller saw service in and 'He Saved Natal' (see Figure 2), and finally the King's Royal Rifles motto: '*Celer et audax*'.³²

In June 1908, Buller died from a long illness and was buried in a Churchyard in Crediton, Devon, not far from his family home, and which continues to be lived in by his descendants today.³³ He is one of the few colonial-era military personnel to have attended the unveiling of their own statue.

Taking account of Buller's potentially divisive legacy, decision-makers have thus been faced with an increasingly volatile debate which centres around balancing regional pride with post-colonial reconciliation. What follows here is a brief outline of Buller's military roles as well as the statue itself, followed by a synopsis of current contestations facing the memorial.

History of the Contestation

A tradition stretches back to as far as the 1960s³⁴ of street cones being placed on top of the statue (a tradition that is seen elsewhere, such as the Duke of Wellington statue in Glasgow).³⁵ Yet, whether this is a direct point of contestation towards Redvers Buller, a political taunt or form of mockery, can itself be questioned. Given the covert nature of the action, and without having direct statements from those responsible, it is unlikely that the placement of the cone of Buller's head will be taken as evidence by the City Council for support towards removal of the statue. With that said, it is inevitable that the Council will consider the health and safety repercussions of the statue given that in 2017 a local teenager passed away after falling from the statue.³⁶ Whilst at first this seemed to lessen instances of climbing on the statue, cones have once again begun to re-appear in the last year, despite tributes also being placed at the base of the statue.³⁷

Perhaps spurred on by the street cone as a talking-point, frequent photos of the statue also appear on social media fostering some quite heated debates between those in favour of the statue and those against.³⁸ The positions here, drawn from conversations on social media, usually take one of the following lines of argument:

- In favour: Buller was a hero, 'our own, born and bred', or 'the past is the past',
- Mixed: Buller is a 'controversial character',³⁹ we should create a plaque 'saying what his military record was',⁴⁰
- Against: 'We have nothing to be proud of',⁴¹ the statue should be removed/relocated ('put in the museum').⁴²

³² Ibid.

³³ Julian Symons, *Buller's Campaign* (London: House of Stratus, 2008), 323.

³⁴ See commentators A, B and C, Figure 2

³⁵ Connor Boyd, "Attack of the cones!," *Dailymail* June 29, 2018,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Rom Preston-Ellis, "People are still risking their lives by putting cone on statue that teen fell to his death from," *DevonLive*, April 27, 2020,

³⁸ See PDF 2 for a snapshot of (anonymised) discussions recorded from a local history social media group.

³⁹ See commentator F, Figure 1B

⁴⁰ See commentator H, Figure 1B

⁴¹ See commentator B, Figure 1A

⁴² See commentator K, Figure 1C

In 2019, the statue was further featured in local media after the word ‘scum’ and the letter ‘A’ inside a circle (interpreted as an anarchist symbol)⁴³ were found to have been spray-painted on its plinth. Particularly evocative descriptions of the spray-paint by local media, referring to it as a ‘graffiti yob’⁴⁴ and ‘senseless vandalism’,⁴⁵ suggest there is a great sense of pride associated with the statue amongst some groups.

In June 2020, the statue received heavy media-coverage in Exeter, following the Black Lives Matter protests in which a banner was draped on the statue saying “Wanted for war crimes”.⁴⁶ The statue also featured on crowd-sourced website Toppletheracists.org,⁴⁷ which highlights statues and monuments that celebrate slavery and racism throughout the UK. Despite very minimal in-person protests, the true repercussions of these campaigns were ultimately in their re-invigoration of council-led discussions around equality and colonialism in Exeter.

Decision-Making Processes

To begin with, the Exeter Council’s Scrutiny Task and Finish Group was asked to investigate the appropriateness of the statue. The Group met on four occasions and took written and oral submissions from a range of stakeholders.⁴⁸ The result of this was made clear on January 12th, 2021, when Exeter’s Executive Council was presented with a ‘Review of the General Buller Statue’, carried out by Director Jon-Paul Hedge. The Hedge Review cited the statue as “the most conspicuous by way of location and controversy”⁴⁹ and concluded with the suggestion that there exist four strands of “significant strength of feeling” within Exeter’s communities. These favoured each of the following: removal of the statue all together, relocation as a form of cultural reference, redefinition by way of narrative (such as adding a sign), and leaving it as it stands and instead focusing on education and inequality around the city.

According to the Hedge Review,⁵⁰ relocation of the statue of Buller was determined to be the best course of action, since “[its] current location is inappropriate because it is outside an educational establishment which includes young people from diverse backgrounds.”⁵¹ No other alternative location was proposed, although the descendent of General Buller, Henry Parker, did put forward the suggestion that Downes House, Buller’s family home, would welcome the statue.

Following the Hedge Review, Exeter’s Executive Councillors voted in favour of the statue’s relocation, due to the Army General’s connection to the British Empire.⁵² Given that this vote was exclusive to the Exeter’s Executive councillors, certain steps remained in place before a date and location could be set for its relocation. This included seeking formal Listed Building consent to move the Grade II monument, a public consultation, and a final vote made by the city’s full council.

⁴³ Joel Cooper, “Outrage as famous Devon statue is vandalised by ‘senseless idiots,” *DevonLive*, January 6, 2019,

⁴⁴ RadioExe, “Redvers Buller statue attacked,” *RadioExe 107.3 DAB*, January 7, 2019,

⁴⁵ Joel Cooper, “Outrage as famous Devon statue is vandalised by ‘senseless idiots,” *DevonLive*, January 6, 2019,

⁴⁶ Jack Malvern, “General Sir Redvers Buller sees off his foes in Exeter statue battle,” *The Times*, February 03, 2021,

⁴⁷ Toppletheracists.org, *Topple the Racists*, March 15th, 2021,

⁴⁸ Exeter City Council, “Councillors to discuss the future of Exeter’s Buller statue,” *Exeter City Council*, January 05, 2021

⁴⁹ Jon-Paul Hedge, ‘Review of the General Buller Statue’, *Report to Executive*, July 7th, 2020,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Alan Quick, “Exeter councillors approve next step towards removal of statue of Crediton-born Buller,” *Crediton Courier*, January 13th, 2021,

⁵² Ibid.

While these measures are undertaken, the Council decided that temporary information boards would be erected near to the statue, so as to inform people of Buller's divisive legacy, until a final decision is agreed upon by the whole Council.

This initial decision received heavy criticism, with a petition on *change.org* seeking to appeal the decision receiving over 9,000 signatures in just under a month, in part citing the £25,000 cost associated with the removal, but otherwise standing against the "erasure" of history (see Figure 3).⁵³ Elsewhere, more conservative views took to slamming the decision as a form of "historical wokery", with the *Daily Mail* choosing to single out the verdict that, "[the statue] impacts anybody who does not define themselves in binary gender terms."⁵⁴

After facing backlash against their decision to relocate the statue of Redvers Buller, the Executive Councillors vote to relocate the statue looked unlikely to have any lasting impact.⁵⁵ The final counteraction to this decision came in the form of a statement by Robert Jenrick, MP and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, who proclaimed that applications for the removal of statues were unlikely to be successful.⁵⁶ This announcement was made in reference to the UK Government's January 2021 announcement of plans for a new law on cultural and historic heritage which seeks to 'retain and explain' as opposed to remove or relocate.⁵⁷ The repercussions of this are likely to have nationwide consequences but its effect has already been strongly felt in Exeter, where, following a meeting on February 9th 2021, councillors voted unanimously to overturn the previous plan to relocate the statue.⁵⁸ Councillor Phil Bialyk of Exeter City Council released a statement which said: "In light of the comments by the Secretary of State, we will not be submitting a planning application to relocate the Buller state."⁵⁹ Thus, the initial vote to relocate the statue of Redvers Buller, prompted by a review into equality impacts in Exeter, led to little more than a reaffirmation of the statue's place in the city.

Future dynamics to consider in decision-making, some of which have already been accounted for in Hedge's Review,⁶⁰ include: community-involvement in the decision-making process, including from both student and under-represented groups, transparency throughout the decision-making process, justification for re-location decisions and its impact on local communities, wider repercussions of accepting inherited guilt/responsibility, including reconciliation with those impacted by such decisions.

Decision makers should also be attentive to the opinions of, and possible effects upon, the following (in no particular order) in their decision-making processes: local groups, including communities in favour and against the placement of the statue in Exeter, international groups,

⁵³ Change.org, "Save Exeter's Statue of Sir Redvers Buller," *Change.org*, February 1st, 2021,

⁵⁴ Alexander Ward, "Council is slammed for 'ridiculous and historical wokery' over plans to remove a statue of a British war hero – with official report claiming it 'impacts anybody who does not define themselves in binary gender terms,'" *Daily Mail*, January 11, 2021,

⁵⁵ Daniel Clark, "Statue will stay as council would be unlikely to get permission to move it," *Express & Echo*, February 4th, 2021,

⁵⁶ Daniel Clark, "Statue to stay but signs will be put near it and wording may change," *The Express and Echo*, February 11th, 2021,

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ ITV News, "Buller Statue to stay in Exeter after unanimous U-turn from council," *ITV News*, February 10th, 2021,

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Jon-Paul Hedge, "Review of the General Buller Statue," *Report to Executive*, July 7th 2020,

including history groups advocating for reconciliation, and descendants of victims of the South African War.

The impact of removal or relocation of the Buller statue is further likely to have effects upon other forms of legacy linked to Buller, including Ladysmith Junior School (named after Ladysmith, Natal), Ladysmith Road (as aforementioned), Buller Square and the Sir General Redvers Buller Pub, both located in Crediton.

Summary and Conclusions

The future of the statue of Redvers Buller has certainly become much clearer since the developments in 2020. While it is set to remain in place in front of Exeter College, it is without doubt the impact of the Black Lives Matter movement which has brought this statue to the forefront of community discussions of equality in Exeter. Out of concerns for hard-to-reach communities in the city and surrounding areas, Director of the Review of Buller's Statue, Jon-Paul Hedge, suggests that a "comprehensive community consultation"⁶¹ will be needed to ensure everyone's views are heard. This is even more crucial now that a decision has been reached concerning the statue's future, with its harming presence likely to continue impacting the city.

Debates concerning the future of the statue, particularly within local history groups, continue to flourish online at the time of the writing of this study. Notably, there have been few, if any, official responses to the statue by the University of Exeter/ Exeter College representatives.

To benefit decision-makers in their considerations moving forward, further research should consider: Buller's role in the propagation of imperialist regimes in the Anglo-Zulu war, his potential links to internment/concentration camps in South Africa, and the effects of these conclusions upon those determined by the Act and Equalities Impact Assessment of Exeter City Council.⁶²

Research contributed by Oliver Anthony

Last updated April 2022

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⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Jon-Paul Hedge, "Review of the General Buller Statue," *Report to Executive*, July 7th 2020

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Figures

Image taken by Oliver Anthony, January 30th, 2021

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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To cite this publication:
The Contested Histories Initiative, "Redvers Buller Statue in Exeter, England", *Contested Histories Case Study #168* (April 2022), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.