



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS MONUMENT

Galway, Ireland

53.270282, -9.054956



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Executive Summary

Christopher Columbus was a famed Genoese explorer whose 1492 expedition across the Atlantic is famous for his 'discovery' of America. Having visited Galway in 1477, a monument commemorating this visit was unveiled in 1992, having been donated by the city of Genoa to mark the 500th anniversary of Columbus' famous voyage. In the wake of the 2020 'Black Lives Matter' (BLM) protests following the murder of George Floyd, the monument was defaced, and the local branch of the left-wing People Before Profit Party called for its removal. With no other party joining People Before Profit in this call – and with the Party having no representatives of its own on Galway City Council to push for removal – the monument remains in place.

Introduction

In 1992, the city of Genoa donated a monument to the town of Galway to commemorate the visit of Christopher Columbus to the city in 1477. The unveiling was part of a series of commemorations of the quincentenary of Columbus's famous voyage in 1492, during which he 'discovered' the Americas, which led to the colonisation of the territories.

In 2020, following video footage of the murder of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, by police officers in Minneapolis, Minnesota, protests calling for racial equality and justice – arranged under the banner of 'Black Lives Matter' – took place across the United States. These protests spread globally, including to Ireland. Following protests in Galway in June, the Columbus monument became a target. The monument was defaced with graffiti while the local branch of the left-wing People Before Profit Party called for its removal. This move was opposed by some councillors and lacked council representation. Without political support, no steps were ever taken at the council level to attempt the monument's removal. The monument remains in place to this date. This case study examines a local effort to 'de-colonise' public space as part of a broader, global movement to remove monuments that opponents argue glorify slaveholders or colonisers.

Background

Christopher Columbus, biography and association with Galway

Christopher Columbus – christened Cristoforo Colombo – was born in 1451 in Genoa, northern Italy. He became a master navigator and admiral whose four transatlantic voyages (1492–93, 1493–96, 1498–1500, and 1502–04) opened the way for European exploration, exploitation, and colonization of the Americas. He has long been called the 'discoverer' of the New World, although Vikings such as Leif Eriksson had visited North America five centuries earlier. Columbus made his transatlantic voyages under the sponsorship of Ferdinand II and Isabella I, the Catholic Monarchs of Aragon, Castile, and León in Spain. He was granted the title of 'Admiral of the Ocean Sea' in April 1492 and was awarded further grants and privileges by the Spanish crown throughout his life. Columbus died in Valladolid, Spain, in 1506.¹

Columbus visited Galway in 1477, a visit attested in his own hand in a margin note on his copy of

¹ Flint, V. I.J.. "Christopher Columbus." Encyclopedia Britannica, May 16, 2021.

Pierre d'Ailly's *Imago mundi*, which still survives.²⁻³ He is believed to have prayed at St. Nicholas' Church in the city during his visit.⁴ It was also while in Galway that he is alleged to have met a certain 'Guillermo Herries' – almost certainly a Portuguese translation of his likely English name, William Harris – who is recorded as having travelled with Columbus in 1492, later being left behind as part of the original colony in modern-day Haiti and there meeting his end at the hands of native rebels.⁵

1992 and the commemoration of Columbus visit to Galway

On the quincentenary of Columbus's first voyage to the Americas in 1492, the city of Genoa presented a monument to the city of Galway to commemorate Columbus' visit to the city in 1477. The sculpture is designed to look like a seabird and was sculpted by Mick Wilkins. The inscription on the plinth that supports the sculpture reads: 'On These Shores Around 1477 The Genoese Sailor Cristoforo Colombo Found Sure Signs Of Land Beyond The Atlantic.' This inscription is produced in both English and Irish, on opposite sides of the plinth, while a note on the base reads: 'La Citta Di Genova Alla Citta De Galway, 29.vi.1992' or 'From the City of Genoa to the City of Galway, 29th June 1992.'⁶

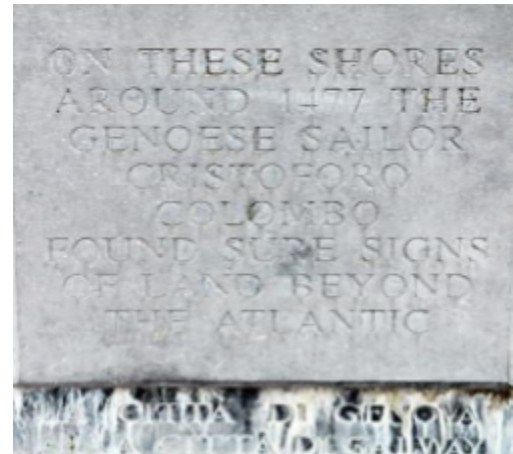


Figure 1: 'Text – in English – of the Plinth of the Columbus monument in Galway.' Image by Pavel Trebukov via Flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

History of the Contestation

Summer of 2020 and Black Lives Matter (BLM) Protests

In 2013, in response to outrage among the black community at the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the high-profile murder trial of the black teenager Trayvon Martin, three black activists created what they describe as a 'Black-centered political will and movement building project' which they called 'Black Lives Matter.'⁷ Support for the movement grew following other

² The *Imago Mundi* ("Image of the World"), was written in 1410 by the French bishop and scholar Pierre d'Ailly (1351-1420). Focused on geography and cosmography, this encyclopedic work was one of the most consulted treatises of the time, and was used by Christopher Columbus to develop his ideas about the viability of navigating the Atlantic to reach the Indies. See Facsimile Finder 'Imago Mundi: Facsimile Edition', facsimilefinder.com.

³ In translation, it reads: 'Men of Cathay have come from the west. [Of this] we have seen many signs. And especially in Galway in Ireland, a man and a woman, of extraordinary appearance, have come to land on two tree trunks [or timbers? or a boat made of such?]' See David B. Quinn, "Columbus and the North: England, Iceland, and Ireland," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (1992), p. 284

⁴ Patsy McGarry, "Galway church visited by Columbus and used as stables by Cromwell's troops celebrates 700 years," *The Irish Times*, September 30, 2020.

⁵ Amanda Driscoll, "Irishman who sailed to America with Christopher Columbus," irishcentral.com, October 11, 2021.

⁶ René & Peter Van Der Krogt, "Monument for Columbus visit to Galway," statues.vanderkrogt.net, June 19, 2014.

⁷ "Herstory", BlackLivesMatter.com, undated.

police killings, including Eric Garner, who died in a chokehold, and Michael Brown, who was killed by an officer who said he acted in self-defence before, in the summer of 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed black man, was murdered by a police officer who knelt on his neck for nine minutes.⁸ The murder of Floyd on May 26 – an event recorded by a bystander on a mobile phone and footage of which was widely disseminated by local, national and international media – catalysed mass protests in all major American cities.⁹

By early June, protests inspired by those in America were taking place in Irish cities. On June 1, thousands of protesters marched to the United States Embassy through central Dublin.¹⁰ Six days later, while another 600 protesters gathered in front of the Embassy in Dublin, a crowd of several hundred gathered in Galway, where a range of speakers led the assembled demonstrators in chants which included 'Black Lives Matter,' 'I can't breathe' and 'Racists Out.'¹¹

Calls for Removal

In the wake of the June 6 BLM protest in Galway city, the left-wing People Before Profit party called on the city council to remove the monument to Columbus. Kiran Emerich, the Party's spokesperson in Galway, told the *Galway Advertiser* that:

Instead of commemorating Columbus, it would be more appropriate for a memorial acknowledging Galway's role in the slave trade. Galway, along with other Irish port towns, were involved in supplying provisions to slave traders in Africa and to slaveowners on the plantations in the colonies in the Americas. This was essential to maintaining the Atlantic slave trade which transported millions of African people as slaves.¹²

The Party said the absence of any reference to Columbus' genocidal brutality' on the monument is disrespectful.¹³ These calls were picked up by others, with an anonymous opinion piece in the *Galway Advertiser* asking its readers to consider:

how would a tourist who is a descendant of former slaves feel seeing this monument? S/he could only draw the following conclusions, that Galway in the 1990s decided to ignore the historical facts surrounding this man and his deeds, and instead chose to endorse imperialism, colonisation, and mass murder, while looking the other way in relation to slavery.¹⁴

Monument defaced

On the night of June 9/10, the monument was defaced with black spray paint.¹⁵ The word 'SCUM' was daubed over the Irish language inscription on the plinth, while 'BLM' had also been scrawled

⁸ Adina Campbell, "What is Black Lives Matter and what are the aims?" BBC News, June 13, 2021.

⁹ Derrick Bryson Taylor, "George Floyd Protests: A Timeline," New York Times, June 2, 2020.

¹⁰ Adam Daly, "'No justice, no peace': Thousands march in Dublin against racism and US police brutality," thejournal.ie, June 1, 2020.

¹¹ Galway Bay FM, "Hundreds attend Black Lives Matter city protest," Galway Bay FM, June 6, 2020.

¹² Kernan Andrews, "Calls for Columbus monument in Galway and Confederate plaque in Tuam to be removed," Galway Advertiser, June 11, 2020.

¹³ Pat McGrath, "Call to remove Galway monuments 'glorifying slavery,'" RTE News, June 9, 2020.

¹⁴ The Insider, "Why Galway needs to talk about Columbus and slavery," Galway Advertiser, July 2, 2020.

¹⁵ Galway Bay FM, "Christopher Columbus sculpture at Spanish Arch Vandalized," Galway Bay FM, June 10, 2020.

on it.¹⁶ Among those to condemn the desecration was Adriano Cavalleri, who was Italy's honorary consul to Galway when the monument was unveiled in 1992. Mr Cavalleri expressed disappointment at the damage done to the monument, telling *Afloat.ie* that the monument was aimed only at celebrating Columbus maritime skills and the link between Galway and Genoa.¹⁷ In the aftermath of the defacement and the heightened awareness about the campaign to remove the monument, more than 17,000 people voted in an online poll run by *thejournal.ie*, which asked simply 'Should the Christopher Columbus memorial in Galway be removed?.' Some 74.1% of those polled voted 'No' (12486) while 18.6% (3141) voted 'Yes' and a further 7.2% of respondents (1221) responded with 'I Don't Know.'¹⁸

Decision-Making Processes

Response of local Politicians

Local councillors in Galway City reacted angrily to the defacement and the calls of People Before Profit for the monuments' removal. Councillor Alan Cheevers (Fianna Fáil) told *Irish Daily Mail* that calls to remove the statue were a 'knee-jerk' reaction to international events. He told the paper that:

The monument is right beside the city's museum, which is being expanded and will be much larger in two or three years. It is a great way for people to learn about the history of the city, of which Christopher Columbus is part [...] Personally, I wouldn't support any change to it, it's a knee-jerk reaction to what's going on. I 100% understand if people want to highlight genocide or slavery but this isn't the way to do it.¹⁹

He argued that Galway had many statues and monuments that are very much part of the city's culture, especially since Galway was serving in 2020 as the European City of Culture and added that any change to monuments would have to go to public consultation.²⁰

Speaking to the same paper, Councillor Donagh Killilea (Fianna Fáil) pointed out that People Before Profit did not have a single elected representative in Galway – either on the city or county council or in the national parliament (Dáil Eireann) – and argued that the Party's position did not represent the views of Galway people: 'There has been a lot of consternation about what happened with George Floyd and rightly so but it is very disingenuous for People Before Profit to call for the dismantling of history, whether that history is good or bad.' Mr Killilea said he was very moved by a visit to Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany, which was used as a testing

¹⁶ Seán O'Driscoll, "Galway backs its Columbus statue," *Irish Daily Mail*, June 12, 2020.

¹⁷ Lorna Siggins, "Damage to Columbus Monument in Galway Condemned," *Afloat.ie*, June 10, 2020.

¹⁸ Orla Ryan, "Poll: Should the Christopher Columbus memorial in Galway be removed?" *thejournal.ie*, June 10, 2020.

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ *Ibid*

site before the construction of other concentration camps across Nazi-controlled Europe. 'The Germans didn't destroy it. It is a reminder of a tragic history. Remembering history is a good thing, whether that history is good or bad,' he said.²¹

Taking a somewhat more nuanced view was Councillor Niall McNeilis (Labour), who said that while he appreciated that people wanted to discuss the legacy of colonialism, vandalism was not the right approach.²²

Galway City Council's first meeting after the BLM protests of the June 6 was held on June 8. The minutes record no discussion of the protests nor any mention of the Columbus statue.²³ The defacement of the statue occurred on the night of June 9/10, in the aftermath of which People Before Profit made their call for the statue's removal. The next meeting of the city council was held on June 15. With no Party other than People Before Profit advocating a policy of removal, and with no People Before Profit Councillors on Galway City Council, the matter of the Columbus statue was not raised at the meeting nor any subsequent meetings.²⁴ Nor have anti-Racism campaigners in Galway made any effort to mobilize public support behind the idea of removing the monument, even though the Galway Anti-racism network has held regular demonstrations at the Spanish Arch, metres from the Columbus monument itself.²⁵

Summary and Conclusions

City councillors quickly dismissed the call by People Before Profit to remove the Columbus monument. Having no councillors of its own, the Party could not launch any formal effort to remove the monument. Nor was there any attempt – then or afterwards - to mobilize public protests against the monuments' continued presence in the city. People Before Profit briefly latched onto the monument as a symbol of the city's failure to deal with its historical involvement in the slave trade in a global reckoning with racial inequality. City councillors defended the monument as a commemoration of a visit of a globally significant figure and the links between the cities of Genoa and Galway. From the journal.ie poll cited above, and the general lack of public debate in the months and years since it appears most of the public are happy to let the monument stand. Short of another outbreak of racialized protest such as that seen globally in the summer of 2021, it appears unlikely that sufficient support will emerge – either publicly or politically – to affect the monument's removal.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Galway City, "Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of Galway City Council held on June 8 2020 at 3.00pm at Leisureisland, Salthill, Galway."

²⁴ Galway City, "Minutes of the Ordinary Meeting of Galway City Council held on June 15 2020 at 3.00pm at Leisureisland, Salthill, Galway."

²⁵ Galway Anti Racism Network, <https://www.facebook.com/GalwayARN>.

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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.

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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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