Memory and Remembrance

The text of a talk by Stewart Ross delivered as one of the Lent Lectures organised by St Peter's Anglican Church, Canterbury

Tuesday 11 March 2025

Good morning everyone and thank you for coming to hear what I have to say on this most significant day. Why significant? Well, I am here in my capacity as Chair of the Canterbury Commemoration Society, an organisation founded in 1996 with the aim of commemorating memorable people and events in Canterbury's rich history, relishing them, and educating people about them. And the significance of today? It is the anniversary of the death of Martin Taylor, one of our founding fathers and a driving force behind the remarkable statues of Queen Bertha and King Ethelbert that stand on Lady Wootton's Green. Those statues commemorate both the figures themselves and, fittingly, those who gave of their time, effort and money to bring them about. Thank you, Martin.

On a lighter note, I would like to play you a little song. It comes from the age of innocence, the film *Gigi*, and is sung by Maurice Chevalier and Hermione Gingold. It's entitled, 'I remember it well!'

[1st verse of song.]

We can all sympathise with Maurice Chevalier, can't we, especially as we get older? That's the trouble with memory – it's an unreliable and erratic faculty.

Unreliable, maybe, but also essential. Individuals, families, communities, churches and countries all exist in both the present and the past, on an ever-expanding continuum. We are what we were, and we understand what we are through memory, through acts of remembrance. That is what makes dementia so distressing – in taking away our past, it takes away our present. And it is why the first act of dictators is to destroy the history books. And why holding on to our history, our roots, is so vital.

Exercises in memory, in remembrance, appear to be hot-wired into the human brain. I know not of a single society throughout history that has not had remembrance ceremonies in some form or another, from ancestor worship exemplified by the household shrines in ancient Greece and China to a wide variety of rituals such as saints' days and memorials – like Liverpool's John Lennon airport.

These serve a variety of needs, most combining the following: they bring people together for a common purpose, such as was evident during the street parties on the anniversary of VE Day; they help create a feeling of shared heritage, of belonging, such as America's Independence Day; they keep alive moments and ideas that are deemed

good for the health of the community, like Black History Month; and they educate successive generations in the customs and heritage of the group or society, such Holocaust Memorial Day. And finally, they show respect for people and events deemed notable, that give context and meaning to the present. Into this category fall the memorials raised by our Society .

At the simplest, most basic level of the family, we celebrate memory and remembrance with birthdays, christenings ('I'm so glad she's got Aunt Winifred's middle name so we won't forget her'), weddings (think toe-curling best man speeches), and, of course, funerals. (How generous we are in our eulogies, how we shutter the full picture!)

In Britain, we remember with Armistice Day, Royal Birthdays, Trafalgar Day, parades (especially in Northern Ireland) and prayers, and of course fireworks on 5 November – though most people have little idea what all that bonfire, fizzing and banging is really all about. But for those assembled here today the acts of remembrance you know best are those associated with the church and the Christian faith, and not just the big ones – Christmas, Easter, Lent, Ascension Day, etc – but the regular, more intimate act of memorial encapsulated in the taking of communion: 'do this this as oft as ye shall drink it, in remembrance of me.' Transubstantiation or not, Jesus certainly knew the importance of remembrance to the species Christians believe he came to save.

So far, so good. Now let's go back to the lyrics we heard a few minutes ago. 'We met at 9 – no, it was eight. I was on time – no, you were late.' Memory, we see, is a double-bladed weapon, a fickle friend. It protects us, gives us context, reassures us but at the same time it may also mislead us and, worse still, be used by others to mislead us.

I will give you a very specific example to explain what I mean. A few years back, I taught a course at a French university on British poetry of the World Wars. When discussing World War II, I happened to use a phrase that I had grown up with, one that I heard my parents often use: 'the miracle of Dunkirk'.

My students looked at me in uncomprehending horror: the withdrawal of the British Army from the beaches of Dunkirk in 1940 – the subject of several films, each more technicolor patriotic and one-sided than the last, was in French eyes anything but a miracle.

'Mais monsieur, it was when you ran away and left us to fight alone.'

Albion at its most perfide. Memory, it seems, is coloured by current needs and emotions.

I once asked the same students what their parents thought of them studying English. Most reported that their mother and father were quite happy with their choice of subject. But not all.

One explained, 'My father hates it.'

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Because the English did not come to our rescue in our hour of need.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. Dunkirk again, I suppose?’

‘No, it was 1793, when the Vendee department rebelled against the revolution.’

That was an event of 250 years ago, dimly and almost uncertainly recalled, and it still has the capacity to engender bitterness.

Nearer to home and on a rather lighter note, I recently wrote my brother’s autobiography for him. It was fascinating how different our childhood memories are: same experiences and personnel but completely different stories.

The lesson, I suppose, is that although we need memory and remembrance – both are unavoidable – we also need to be aware of their shortcomings. We can unwittingly twist the past to our own ends or accept distortion without question. We can use it not to learn but to justify the present, and not always in a pleasant or ethical manner.

I was continually reminded of this while, as an undergraduate and postgraduate, I studied history – a discipline founded on remembrance. The subject was utterly compelling, but what was the point of it? It was a question that inevitably arose in seminar and especially in discussion with hard-nosed engineers and medics. We asked it of ourselves, too.

There was at the time a lively debate about the answer. One, espoused by Professor Jack Plumb, was practical. An example might be the failure of successive invaders of Afghanistan to heed the voice of history and pull back at the frontiers of that unconquerable land of mountain and tribal ferocity. My undergraduate hero, Professor Geoffrey Elton, rejected this school of thought. (My reason for this hero-worship was not just academic: when he came to our university to lecture, I was detailed to give him tea beforehand.

‘Tea?’ he snorted. ‘Got any whisky?’ Memorable man.)

To study history for practical reasons, Elton argued, was getting things the wrong way round. If we examine the past to help us understand the present, he declared, if we go looking for answers to present problems, the very act of doing so is unhistorical because it undermines our objectivity. In trawling the past for answers to present questions, we inevitably focus on the facts that give us answers and overlook, consciously or otherwise, information that does not. If we look at Russian history, for example, with the purpose of understanding why democracy has found it so hard to take root there, the quest will colour our research, the documents we read and the way we interpret them. The sole purpose of true history, Elton concluded, was a search for

truth, an elusive, ultimate objectivity. Impossible to find, of course, but that does not mean one should not try.

I am, I must confess, haunted by Professor Elton's ghost. This was never more apparent than when writing my minefield of a book on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. The blurb says it shows 'engaging objectivity'. If that is anything other than publisher's hype, it is purely because I felt Geoffrey Elton breathing down my neck with every word I wrote.

His heavy breath Is still there in my role as Chair of the Commemoration Society. Who or what should we commemorate? Objectivity is impossible because we are influenced by the flavour of the month, the mores of the present. Inevitably, Elton's ghost would argue, every age commemorates elements of the past that accord with its own values and interests, thereby reinforcing them and probably distorting the original event. What we may well be doing, therefore, is unwittingly commemorating ourselves, our values, our point of view.

Let me offer a few specific examples. There is currently a plan to place commemorative blue plaques on the blank wall of St Augustine's Abbey in Longport. They should be of notable figures associated with the Abbey. St Augustine himself, of course, comes top of the list – understandable enough because he founded the abbey. Next in current thinking comes Abbot Adrian. Why? We know he was a man of great learning, an excellent organiser, modest and much respected. Even more significant in 21st century terms, he was an African, probably a Berber from North Africa. I need not explain why, when enquiring which men and women associated with St Augustine's ought to be commemorated, Adrian is in the silver medal position. Moving on, there is now some controversy over whether Adrian should be joined on the wall by King Henry VIII. The Tudor monarch may have played a major role in the Abbey's history, turning it from a place of worship into a royal palace, but his personal behaviour was not – to put it mildly – in keeping with modern values. If you want to know what I'm talking about, watch or read Wolf Hall.

Another example: the Commemoration Society is currently planning a new tranche of blue plaques for the city as a whole, commemorating people and events deemed worth of remembrance. All kinds of people have been suggested, including two women considered criminal rogues in their day: Margaret Hughes, hanged beside the Westgate in 1799 for poisoning her husband, and Mary Moders. Mary was condemned to penal servitude for a series of spectacularly imaginative crimes, including bigamy (or more accurately trigamy or quadrigamy), masquerading as a German princess, and petty theft. She escaped from Jamaica, pretended to be a rich heiress, married yet again before she was eventually hanged at Tyburn in 1673.

We don't know why Margaret poisoned her husband, but today we are more inclined towards pity than condemnation, and the method of her death we find horrifying. She

was also, I believe, the last person hanged in Canterbury before the gallows were moved to Maidstone. Do we commemorate this fact with a plaque to Margaret? And do we raise a plaque to Mary Moders for giving us a story so extraordinary that it should never be forgotten? If we do go ahead and memorialize to these two, unfortunate and cruelly executed women, are we commemorating them or our own, supposedly more humane and enlightened views?

Questions like that are repeated and reflected all over the land, not just in the monuments we raise but in those we do not raise and even in those we pull down. Cecil Rhodes provided for the establishment of the international Rhodes Scholarship at University of Oxford, the oldest postgraduate scholarship in the world. Should we commemorate him? Edward Coulson endowed the city of Bristol with huge sums of money for the public good. Should we commemorate him?

Similar queries were floating around during the choice of Aphra Behn for the Commemoration Society's latest statue. As recently as 1897, the author William Henry Hudson wrote, 'Mrs Behn wrote foully; and this for most of us, and very properly, is an end of the whole discussion.' Her works were not published, scarcely ever read, and no one put on her plays. The Victorians would probably have rather erected a commemorative statue of the devil himself than one of Aphra Behn. And now, some 125 years later, there she stands in the High Street, unveiled by no less a person than Her Majesty the Queen. How come? The choice of Aphra – representing female determination, resilience and talent – reflects our society, our priorities and our aspirations.

In Cicero's words, 'O tempores! O mores!'

One further caveat when considering commemoration has already been hinted at: the manner in which history so easily slides into myth. Thus the Blackadder history of the First World War where soldiers spent their time knee-deep in mud and most of them died – and it was all the fault of their commanding officers; and the newspaper driven-dictum that who die in war on our side (even if conscripted or rogues, or both) are by definition heroes; more extreme is the unscrupulous use of myth to produce claims such as 'we are God's chosen people' or 'we are the master race' … and so on.

We must take great care, therefore, that in commemorating the past, its people and its events, we are not engaging in a process of sanitization, of distorting or rejecting facts that do not accord with our own views, of making ourselves feel better or special. Or even, as in movements such as that to decolonize the curriculum, make others feel guilty for events over which they had no control. I can understand the feelings behind the American promulgation of the concept of 'white guilt' but I find it unhelpfully divisive and unhistorical – a classic example of examining the past subjectively to find what one is looking for, of interpreting history through the eyes of the present. Let's remember

that, in insightful Biblical terms at least, we are a fallen species, all sinners and precious few, if any, saints. Once again, Jesus got it spot on, 'Let him who is without sin, cast the first stone.'

Where does this leave us? Remembrance is an ineradicable feature of human nature. We need it to give meaning to our individual lives and to our societies. Indeed, for Christians it lies at the heart of the ritual that reminds them of the essence of their faith.

But as I mentioned at the start of this talk, memory – individual as well as collective (especially collective) – is unreliable. Consequently, it would be wise to bear this in mind when considering acts of remembrance. If we engrave on the wall of our consciousness Geoffrey Elton's definition of history as the quest for an unattainable truth, we will be aware that we view the past, its people and its events, through a glass darkly, and that smoky glass may engender distortion and exploitation.

So let me now attempt to sum up where we have got to. It is part of our nature, we frail, flawed and insecure human beings, to remember and to commemorate. This is all well and good, beneficial and enjoyable, too, as long as we do our best to ensure that our commemorations are guided not by what we wish the past had been like – it is, after all, another country – nor by a desire to reflect well on ourselves, signalling our virtue, but guided, as best we are able by the cold light of objective truth. Speaking personally, I can find no great help in so doing than the immortal words of Oliver Cromwell to the Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 'I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible that you may be mistaken.'

Though not, of course, when it comes to your decision whether or not to join the Canterbury Commemoration Society!