

BOOK REVIEW

Review of Erin L. Thompson, *Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2022. Pp. 264. \$25.95

A constant of “regime change,” or even the entrance into the general political order of formerly excluded groups, is a change in the public landscape, which, of course, includes the public monuments that act to signify what might be termed the “official” heroes or significant moments of a given polity. Erin L. Thompson begins this interesting book with the story of the destruction of the statue of His Royal Majesty King George III that once dominated Bowling Green Park in Lower Manhattan. It was one of the first casualties of the American Revolution. (Actually, I much prefer to call it the American Secession from the British Empire, just more evidence of the fact that nomenclature, like a monument, carries with it inevitable political and ideological overtones.) The lead in the equestrian monument was melted down into 42,088 musket balls that were presumably used in battles against the Redcoats (5) or, perhaps, against fellow “Americans” who had remained loyal to their king.

The fate of the monarch’s statue is only one of the monuments that Thompson, a professor of art crime at the City University of New York, presents in this short and lively book, which is both a strength and a weakness. All of the specific monuments and the politics surrounding their “smashing” are well worth the reader’s attention, especially given the care with which she has both excavated historical materials or interviewed contemporary actors. Thus, the account of the attack on the monument of Christopher Columbus in Minneapolis is much enriched by her immersion in the efforts of various members of the Indigenous nation communities in that state to protest against the continued valorization of the ostensible “discoverer” of America. Columbus, who, of course, never set foot in what actually became the United States, symbolizes for his critics what some might describe as the genocidal displacement of those who certainly did not need him to “discover” the lands on which they had lived for centuries or, indeed, millennia.

Another illuminating chapter focuses on the history of Stone Mountain, outside of Atlanta, and its honoring of Confederate notables, through gigantic sculptures carved literally out of the mountain itself. The chapter centers on Gutzon Borglum, who, among other things, joined the Ku Klux Klan in order to prove his commitment to the cause behind this specific memorialization. For a variety of reasons, he was ultimately dismissed; he went on, of course, to even greater fame as the sculptor of Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Other chapters focus on other Confederate monuments and attempts, both successful and unsuccessful, to remove them from the public squares in Birmingham, Alabama, and Charlottesville, Virginia.

As befits her own legal training, Thompson notes that, for better or worse, law becomes a perhaps inevitable part of the discussion. State legislatures in both Alabama and Virginia – and they were not alone – have been assiduous in attempting to prevent localities from exercising their own autonomy in deciding what should, and should not, dominate local downtowns. An ostensible commitment to “historical preservation,” protected by the majesty of the law, is a powerful barrier against those who would reshape the public square.

What Thompson does, she does very well in this relatively short book – 185 pages prior to many footnotes. She writes engagingly, and anyone interested in the “monument wars” will

certainly benefit from reading it. That being said, the book is considerably weaker with regard to presenting anything that might be called a systematic approach to deciding when, and why, monuments should be preserved or quite deliberately removed. Beginning with the hapless “Mad King,” her examples are not likely to generate much cognitive dissonance for her likely readers. One would not expect many Confederate sympathizers – or even partisans of Christopher Columbus – to read this book. It is easy enough for most of “us” to agree that it is past time to reshape many public landscapes, including, especially, sometimes thoroughly objectionable towering monuments that dominate them.

For instance, Thompson presents an excellent and, certainly, illuminating discussion of Horatio Greenough’s statue *Rescue*, placed at the US capitol in Washington, DC, in which an imposing white figure is depicted dominating a Native American. Not surprisingly, as with Columbus, the statue was always the target of criticism by Indigenous nations. Apparently, the House of Representatives considered a resolution in 1939 calling for *Rescue* to be “ground into dust” and “scattered to the four winds” so that it would not be a “constant reminder to our American Indian citizens” about our “barbaric past” (32). Not surprisingly, albeit lamentably, it did not pass; *Rescue* was removed in 1958 only because of general repair work being done to the capitol. However, it was not restored to its previous pride of place, remaining in storage until it was accidentally destroyed in 1976. Still, we are told, “[i]ts fragments linger in a government warehouse” (33). Again, one suspects that all of her readers will agree that we are well rid of *Rescue* as a centerpiece of the US capitol’s sculptures.

But there is no unanimity when one looks at the wider polity, even with regard to Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, however regrettable many of us might find that. And what if one generalizes the discussion to include, say, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, or Abraham Lincoln? Charles Blow, for example, wrote a striking column in the *New York Times*, arguing that no slaveholder should be honored by the present-day United States.¹ The “father of our country” might have expressed some reservations about enslavement, but he did notably little during his life to question it, and he was notably unsympathetic to several “fugitives” from his plantation at Mount Vernon. Similar reservations would apply to Jefferson, James Madison, and, in fact, most of the presidents prior to the Civil War (and those who did not own slaves were likely to be Democrats whose coalitions included what came to be called the “slavocracy”). Princeton University went through a much-publicized reckoning with its own important president, Woodrow Wilson, who, when he became president of the United States, did whatever he could to restore segregation and maintain white supremacy.

Abraham Lincoln is discussed in the context of a Washington, DC, statue portraying him delivering the Emancipation Proclamation to a kneeling slave. In recent years, it has become highly controversial inasmuch as it conveys what has come to be called the “white savior” narrative of our racial history. An important part of Nikole Hannah-Jones’s *The 1619 Project*, for example, is devoted to bringing to the fore the degree to which Blacks and other minorities were agents of their own liberation, not dependent on sympathetic whites to save them.² Ironically or not, Frederick Douglass, in his great speech dedicating the Lincoln monument, emphasized that Lincoln was a president for the “white man,” whose undoubted contributions to Black emancipation always had to be understood in the context of his primary loyalty to the interests of his fellow whites.

Thompson has a typically incisive historical overview of the construction of the statue and some of the debates it stirred at the time – that is, 1876 – but she is relatively silent on

¹ Charles Blow, “Yes, Even George Washington,” *New York Times*, 28 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/28/opinion/george-washington-confederate-statues.html?searchResultPosition=1> (accessed 4 May 2022).

² Hannah-Jones et al. 2021.

exactly what should be done with regard to the valorization of many of America's worthies today, including, perhaps, Lincoln himself. After all, there are not only some perturbing endorsements of white supremacy and the impossibility of a genuinely biracial American society in some of his own speeches; he also emphasized, at least early in the Civil War, that he was far more devoted to preserving the Union than to ending slavery. To the absolute dismay of Douglass, Lincoln supported in his first inaugural a constitutional amendment that would have recognized the perpetual right of those states in which slavery already existed to maintain it. He also agreed, as president, to the hanging of "thirty-eight Dakota men after hasty, flawed trials" for their actions during the US-Dakota War of 1862 (110). Thompson is, obviously, fully aware of Lincoln's own checkered presidency, and her earlier chapters, focusing on Columbus and Greenough's elaboration of the American "rescue" narrative, elicit great (and justified) sympathy for what might be termed the Indigenous critique of the standard American approach to historical memory and memorialization. But how much of it do we want to apply to Lincoln himself, especially if one recognizes the almost unique place that the Lincoln Memorial – the site, after all, of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech at the politically monumental march in Washington, DC, in August 1963 – plays as the central temple of our national civic religion? Much more could have been said, and the reader would be genuinely interested to know Thompson's views given her commendable immersion in the materials.

The brief last chapter offers anodyne recommendations that we "discuss" monuments and memorialization "democratically" (184). "We need to come together as communities," Thompson declares, "to make sure our monuments leave room for everyone's life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" (183). But this elides the painfully obvious fact that there may very well be no singular American (or even Birmingham) "community" that will be recognized by everyone within it as an authoritative decision maker with regard to monuments. After all, if one is generously disposed (and politically myopic), one can view the efforts of the Alabama legislature to deprive Birmingham of its local autonomy as an effort by the statewide community of Alabamans to prevent an unrepresentative minority in its largest city from traducing Alabama's identity. If one accepts the common dictum that one person's (or community's) terrorist is another one's freedom fighter, then one must realize the unlikelihood that any degree of concord will readily appear when deciding who deserves memorialization. Monuments are ultimately efforts to answer questions about local, state, or national identity, and there will almost always be contestation about what that identity is and, as much to the point, who should get to describe it.

I would be interested to know if Thompson believes that a possible path toward a solution is presented at what today is called the Little Bighorn National Monument, formerly named after George Armstrong Custer. Statues memorialize not only Custer and his fellow soldiers "massacred" by the Sioux warriors but also the Sioux themselves, who were, after all, simply trying to defend their land against illegitimate conquest. But wait, there's more! For there is also a memorial to the Crow scouts who in fact collaborated with Custer and the US Army, presumably on the principle that the enemy of my enemy – who in the case of the Crow were the Sioux – is my friend. The complexities of American history also serve to explain the fact that the last Confederate general formally to surrender to Union forces was Stand Watie, a Cherokee from what is now Oklahoma, whose family had been brutally displaced by Andrew Jackson and forced to travel along the Trail of Tears from Georgia. Why would one expect Watie to rally on behalf of the Union that had so mistreated his own family? And, to add to the historical stew, many Cherokees themselves owned Black slaves. Similar questions might be raised about the many enslaved Black persons who ran away and enlisted in the British attempt to prevent the American secession, perhaps because they agreed with Hannah-Jones's controversial assertion that one impetus for the Secession/Revolution

was fear that the British were reconsidering their support for slavery.³ Should we expect to see memorials to those brave fighters for freedom, many of whom ended up joining their fellow Loyalists in exile in Canada or even in Sierra Leone?

A problem with any book on public monuments is that there are so many more possible examples to write about than any author could possibly cover, and it is unfair to expect Thompson to write what might be an impossibly “comprehensive” treatment of her subject. This is especially true if, for example, we are also interested in “statue smashing” abroad as well as within the United States, as has happened, say, with the statues of Cecil Rhodes, especially in South Africa, or of a number of British enslavers in Great Britain. Any author must pick and choose.

Smashing Statues is successful in setting out several fascinating episodes both in the American past and more recently that serve to illustrate the problems presented by public monuments. However, the book would have been stronger had Thompson presented any systematic argument about what deserves to be preserved, even with suitable ambivalence, compared to what should be “smashed.” This is not to say, incidentally, that there is a grand theory, or algorithm, that will resolve all, or even most, of the actual controversies. I suspect that the search for a grand theory is itself destined to fail. But we can be sure that the issues presented by the examples that Thompson presents will not disappear in the future and require us, using whatever intellectual resources and political sagacity we possess, to take positions and, in some cases, make decisions. All of us, whether as readers, ordinary citizens, or, perhaps, members of city councils or public art commissions will be called upon to decide, if not who shall live and who shall die, then, at least, who shall be remembered and who shall be consigned to oblivion.

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³ Hannah-Jones 2021, 10–18.

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