Everything is Relevant

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Tracking Colonialism from Delhi to Toronto
Edward VII in Queen’s Park

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It was a picture-perfect day as I sat down on a public bench in the centre of Queen’s Park in Toronto. There were children playing about me, people casually strolling, and sunshine breaking unevenly through the canopy of oak and maple trees. I was early for my presentation at the nearby University of Toronto, so I sat and took in a scene from Toronto’s most symbolically important park.1 What I saw before me called up not just memories of previous park experiences but countless design renders, from city planning to landscape architectural presentations.

Directly in front of me was a large equestrian statue cast in bronze. I did not think much about it until I noticed a plaque at the front jutting up awkwardly from the ground. I was immediately compelled to know more about this work. It turns out that the statue depicts Edward VII, who was king of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 1901 until his death in 1910.2 Dressed in military regalia, he sits with ease on his prancing mount. One hand pulls back the reins while the other holds onto a plumed hat.

The aforementioned plaque is the largest of three in front of the statue.3 Shaped like a shield and adorned with a bas-relief of the British crown with laurels and ribbons, it also proclaims:

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1 The park is home to the Ontario Legislative Building and its name is often used metonymically for the Government of Ontario.
2 Edward VII was born in 1841, the second child of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.
3 Together the three plaques form chapters that tell the history of this statue.
George V was the second and only surviving son of Edward VII. He became king of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, as well as the emperor of India, after his father died. India was considered to be the “brightest jewel in the Imperial diadem” of the British Empire. Royal Academy sculptor Thomas Brock was commissioned to create this statue of Edward VII specifically for the Durbar of 1911. Four years later it was relocated to Edward Park in Delhi. The Durbar of 1911 was staged to mark the accession of George V. The event took the form of an extravagantly staged public reception with maharajahs from across India arriving to take their turns swearing loyalty to George V and his wife, Mary, the queen consort of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, and empress consort of India.6

The second plaque in front of the statue bears a modest stamp of the former coat of arms of the City of Toronto and declares:

Queen’s Park. This park was opened September 11th, 1860 by the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII and named in honour of his mother Queen Victoria. Erected by the Toronto Historical Board.

1860 was an auspicious year in Chinese history. It was the year of the Convention of Beijing and the end of the Opium War, an ignominious conflict between China and the British Empire over the right of the British to exchange opium for silks, teas, porcelain, and other desired Chinese goods. With the end of the Opium War, Kowloon and Hong Kong were ceded in perpetuity to the British and in 1898 a ninety-nine-year lease was accorded to the British for an additional part of the Kowloon peninsula known as the New Territories. When that lease expired in 1997, Britain had little choice but to “return” what would have been an economically isolated Hong Kong. In advance of the repatriation of Hong Kong to China in 1997, thousands of Hong Kong Chinese applied for Canadian passports with the hope of settling in places like Vancouver and Toronto.

The third plaque reads:
Equestrian Statue of King Edward VII. Originally standing in Edward Park, Delhi, India, this statue was erected on the present site through the generous subscriptions of the citizens of this area. This gift to the City of Toronto was made possible by the Government of India and the former Canadian High Commissioner to India, His Excellency the Right Honourable Roland Michener, C.C., C.D., Governor General of Canada, and brought to the City through the personal generosity of Henry R. Jackman, Esq., Q.C. May 24, 1969. William Dennison, Mayor.

As a Canadian of Cantonese-Chinese descent, with knowledge and experience of the history above, this statement stands as a clear reminder of Canada’s persistent colonial nature. The statue of King Edward VII was removed from India as part of a “process of getting rid of reminders of the days of British rule.”7 And yet, in 1969, during a period of major, global political upheaval, as the world decolonized from various European yokes after the Second World War, Canada wanted this statue as its own. This was also at the end of a decade of rising Canadian consciousness and sensitivity about Canada’s place in the world, which developed under Pierre Trudeau’s premiership and his Third Option politics of greater national autonomy, especially from American economic and cultural influence. There was also desire on the part of Trudeau and an increasingly multicultural Canada to lessen British cultural influence. Just two years later, in 1971, efforts were made to amend the British North America Act, which had served as Canada’s de facto constitution since the Confederation year of 1867.8

Thus the story of Edward VII’s statue is also a story of the divides within the British Empire itself, which, after the Second World War, was rebranded as the Commonwealth of Nations. The first divide is between those countries that were colonized and experienced the traumas of colonization, such as India, Africa, and the Caribbean countries, and those countries referred to as white dominions, such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. (Originally, there were three other dominions, including the Irish Free State, South Africa, and Newfoundland.) The second divide could be experienced from within Canada, and it was between the ruling British (or Anglophiles) and the many subjugated and disenfranchised peoples within Canada who did not identify as British (or anglophone).

My childhood took place in Vancouver during the 1960s and I recall experiencing this oppressive distinction between Canadians of British descent and pretty much everyone else. Skin colour also constituted a


8 Although the Constitution was repatriated in 1982, in 1971 the provincial premiers proposed the Victoria Charter, which would have enshrined fundamental rights, official bilingualism, and established a constitutional amendment formula. The document was ultimately rejected by Quebec.
9 I am thinking especially of the paintings of Richard Wilson.

10 Edward Hobart Seymour (1840–1928) was a Royal Navy officer who participated in the 1857 siege of Guangzhou (Canton) during the Second Opium War; he was promoted to admiral in 1901 for his service during the Boxer Rebellion (also known as the Boxer Uprising or Boxer Movement). Thomas Douglas, fifth earl of Selkirk (1771–1820) established the Red River Colony in 1811 in what is now Manitoba. William Ewart Gladstone (1809–98) was four times prime minister of Great Britain (1868–74; 1880–85; 1886; 1892–94).

major divide between white and non-white. British expatriate scholars dominated Canadian universities at the cost of academic diversity, and this dominance continued for many years until their retirements. The historical collections of art museums across Canada were full of British painters and especially those known for landscape-as-arcadia painting.9

The move of the Edward VII statue from Delhi to Toronto was financed by Henry Jackman, CEO of the aptly named Empire Life Insurance. The statue arrived in Toronto in late 1968 but its presence was not publicly acknowledged until early 1969, when the mayor of Toronto, William Dennison, formally accepted the statue as a donation on behalf of the Parks and Recreation Committee. This was all done without any public consultation. The mayor even agreed to Jackman’s suggestion for its placement at its present site, directly front-and-centre of the oval grounds on the north end of Queen’s Park, behind the Ontario Legislative Building. Such a move without democratic process would likely not have been controversial for the then-dominant British expatriate population of Toronto. As for the voices of other Torontonians, I suspect that they surely knew their places.

This was how I remember my childhood in Vancouver. At school, “God Save the Queen” was sung regularly each morning after “O Canada.” The Lord’s Prayer would then follow to open the school day. I remember several of my teachers referencing the government of South Africa as heroic in its struggle to bring “civilization” to the country oppressed by apartheid. The schools I attended, including Admiral Seymour Elementary School, Lord Selkirk Elementary School, and Gladstone Secondary School, were all named after Britons who had built their careers committing repressive acts against many colonized peoples. Admiral Seymour Elementary School was located in the eastern edge of Strathcona, a neighbourhood of predominantly working-class Cantonese-Chinese that bordered Vancouver’s Chinatown. As an adult I learned that Admiral Seymour had been commander-in-chief of China Station, a naval formation of Royal Navy ships responsible for safeguarding British commercial interests along the entirety of China’s coastline and waterways.10

In 1914, three years after the dedication of the Edward VII statue in Delhi, almost four hundred passengers from the province of Punjab in British India sailed the Japanese-registered steamship Komagata Maru from Hong Kong to Vancouver. As British subjects, their passports afforded them the privileges to travel and emigrate to any other part of the Empire—or so they thought. An armed Canadian navy ship was mobilized to meet the Komagata Maru. The ship eventually anchored in Vancouver harbour from 23 May to 23 July 1914, but only
twenty returning immigrants and a handful of others received permission to disembark.\textsuperscript{11} The \textit{Komagata Maru} was forced to return to India by way of Kolkata, and within hours of disembarking, twenty of its more than three hundred passengers would be killed by British Indian police gunfire.

In the centre of Queen’s Park, Edward VII’s equestrian statue tramples the ground on which it stands. This is the very ground on which First Nations history is sited, yet nowhere is that acknowledged by the statue or its markers. Any First Nations history is literally and figuratively overshadowed by a figure that embodies a certain kind of imperial and colonial power, and its forceful privileging of that which is male and white. While the statue may seem to be a benign part of a picture-perfect scene in Toronto’s most important historical park, it is vital to look in the shadows of this statue and think about all that lies beneath.

\textsuperscript{11} There was already a small population of South Asians in Vancouver at the time.