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Author

Piperoglou, Andonis

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Stuff the British Stole: a probing podcast on the legacies of imperial theft

Andonis Piperoglou, Griffith University, a.piperoglou@griffith.edu.au

Stuff the British Stole, Marc Fennel, writer/host, Radio National, Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2020. Podcast website: <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/stuff-the-british-stole/>

Laden with brutal stories of theft and looting, the history of European imperialism is often baffling and irksome. The perplexing paradox that peoples and places across the world were divided and conquered, while the artefacts of such people and places could be valued, classified and preserved in genteel European institutions reveals an imperial history that is contradictory and contested. In Radio National's new podcast *Stuff the British Stole*, Marc Fennell, a lauded film critic, technology reporter and radio personality, imaginatively explores the layered histories and contemporary relevance of Britain's stolen objects. In five punchy, well-researched, and entertaining episodes, Fennell offers his listeners an inviting and intimate non-fictional storytelling podcast format. Tracing the not-so-polite history behind objects that the British blatantly took under their reign, Fennell is keen to show that the dynamics of British imperialism are never straightforward. Centring on a single object, each episode takes us on a journey from where the object originated to the moment of seizure, and to where the object is currently housed to exploring its enduring meaning to the everyday lives of descendants of colonised people.

The objects that are explored are strikingly different and their origins reveal the global breadth of Britain's imperial reach. From the shores of Benin to the former opulence of Beijing's Summer Palace, and from the Kingdom of Mysore (today in the Indian state of Karnataka) to the coastline of Gweagal country, we are taken on a comprehensive historical tour that covers not only the disturbing history of imperial plunder but also the lingering legacy of such acts. A chorus of voices and opinions are shared, including Fennell's own, and this is infused with audio elements like environmental sounds and long pauses between questions that accentuate the ongoing weight that imperial thefts have in our contemporary society. An enlightening pantheon of historians, activists and descendants directly linked to the object under investigation anchor the narrative of each episode.

In the first episode on Tipu's Tiger, a mechanical wooden toy that depicts an East India Company soldier being mauled by a tiger, we are introduced to a conversation between our host and his London cab driver, a migrant from India. The cab driver is dumfounded that his Australian customer, despite having Singaporean-Indian background, has not visited his country of origin. The conversation instantly brings the relationship between the colonial past and our modern era into sharp focus. In another episode we become acquainted with Hillary Du Cros, an Australian Pekingese dog breeder, as an entry point to the story of Lord Elgin, the son of the man who removed the so-called "Elgin marbles" from the Parthenon. In 1860, at the end of the Second Opium War, Lord Elgin issued an order to burn the Summer Place in Beijing and steal the many royal treasures that lay waiting inside. One of these was "Looty", a Pekingese dog that was gifted to Queen Victoria, and perhaps the spark for today's celebrity obsession with small dogs. Here the history of imperial theft is cleverly blended with the history of fashion and design.

In the final powerful episode, we are brought closer to home and introduced to the contested history behind an Indigenous shield that was supposedly taken from Gweagal lands by Joseph Banks. The shield is owned by the British Museum and its story is full of historical ambiguities and political action. The enduring activism of Rodney Kelly, a descendant of Gweagal warrior, Cooman, and Noeleen Timbrey, chair of the La Perouse Local Aboriginal Land Council, to have the shield returned to Australia is situated alongside the research of historian Maria Nugent and the museum's Oceania curator Gaye Sculthorpe. The image of the shield as a symbol of defence and resistance is a powerful one that reveals much about the reasoning behind advocating for historical justice and restitution in the present.

For me, as the son of a Greek who was born in the former British possession of Cyprus, stories of the British stealing stuff were never far from the surface during my childhood years. The senior Lord Elgin's infamous loot, in particular, loomed large. The displaying of the Parthenon marbles in the British Museum and the concurrent legal, moral and cultural arguments to return them to the Acropolis Museum remains a persistent historical wound in my diasporic consciousness. Rationales for returning and remaining each have popular support. Until I heard the stories presented in *Stuff the British Stole*, I was unsure how to interpret this loaded history of civilisational heritage and restitution. Now, due to Marc Fennell's podcast, I do. *Stuff the British Stole* is probing and illuminating yet manages to delicately address the consequences and contradictions of British imperialism. It invites us to not only consider the persistent imperial desire to steal and preserve but also to reflect on how imperial theft and preservation has influenced our contemporary culture. It should be appreciated as an important educational tool that will assist historical thinkers, teachers and students to honestly reflect on how our shared imperial inheritances have affected the world we live in. In an era when colonial injustices cannot be ignored, we are informed in the last episode that a second instalment of *Stuff the British Stole* is forthcoming. If the second series is anything like the first then we should look forward to it as it will help us rethink the ethical relationship between past wrongs and present responsibilities.