

Recognition and Reparation in Philanthropy: History and the Rustat memorial plaque controversy

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This Laidlaw Scholarship case study is part of the *Recognition and Reparation in Philanthropy* project, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and implemented by the UCL History Department. The project considers how philanthropic and other institutions can address the tensions arising from recognition of 'historical harms'. These include acquisition of wealth generated through the trade in enslaved people, or through particularly aggressive accumulative or extractive practices. More recent harms include promotion of ideas and interventions that have been discredited or considered coercive and morally unacceptable.

The overall goal of the project is, through key informant interviews, mini-case studies and review of relevant documentation, to produce a 'toolkit' of principles and possible actions, grounded in historical scholarship, that can assist organisations in navigating these sensitive issues in ways that are both constructive and reparative.

My project investigated a 2022 high-profile legal ruling relating to the (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to remove from display in the chapel of Jesus College Cambridge, a memorial plaque for college benefactor Tobias Rustat (1608-94), on the grounds of his involvement in the trade of enslaved people.



Figure 1

The investigation focuses on the extent to which *history* (as both discipline and profession) informs contemporary debates about recognition and reparation practices. The case is of particular significance because of the involvement of academic historians as expert witnesses. Through analysis of local, national and international media coverage, the case study explores the *accuracy* of reporting of historical fact and the perception of, and value attached to, the expert witness reports. The study thus sheds light on the broader role played by historical scholarship in contributing to perceptions of the Rustat case in particular, and questions of recognition and reparation more broadly.

The Research Problem

The Rustat case is an example of how institutions are grappling with contested historical legacies.

The purpose of the study is, through analysis of a variety of examples of media coverage, to assess how accurately the historical facts of the case were reported; whether reporting was influenced by the historical expert witness reports; and the broader role played by historical scholarship in relation to the Rustat memorial.

In Spring 2021, Jesus College petitioned the Diocese of Ely to relocate a memorial of Sir Tobias Rustat from the west wall of the College Chapel. Jesus College argued for its removal for several reasons. Firstly, the memorial was said to compromise the mission of the Church of England through demonstrable negative impact on those who visited the Church, thereby impeding its welfare mission. The College argued that the memorial is an unqualified veneration of Rustat and his benefactions; revealing nothing about his involvement in the slave trade.

The Rustat Memorial Group (those opposing the removal and comprised of 65 alumni and concerned faculty) argued that Jesus College was seeking to erase Rustat's history and association with Jesus College. In response, the College argues that it sought to contextualise the memorial outside of a place of worship.

Parties opponent argued that the College's case lacked merit for two main reasons. First, the college's petition was based on a 'false narrative' concerning Rustat's life and involvement in the slave trade, amounting to an omission of the fundamental facts of the case. Second, it represented an attempt to 'erase history'.

Methodology and findings

This report is based on analysis of 12 examples of media coverage of the Rustat Memorial controversy. Supplementary reading included both the official judgement and historical expert witness testimonies.

Out of the articles examined, the vast majority accurately reported the facts. Out of the media examined, only six had evidence of the facts being misrepresented (3 minor and 3 significant). For the most part, the historical facts reported in the articles was not a question of accuracy but of how selective they were in their coverage in the case. Consistent articles in the 'comment' section of newspapers, crucial facts can be omitted, or used selectively in support of the writers' argument.

Additionally, there are only two references to the expert witnesses, showing that the historical scholarship represented by the court-appointed experts, has been largely ignored in the media coverage of the Rustat case.

Nevertheless, a significant issue raised by re-examining Rustat's memorial, is the role played by *current* benefactors. Several writers argued that Jesus College should consider its relationship with China, now a significant donor. Many columnists draw parallels between the controversy surrounding the Rustat plaque and donations from Chinese philanthropists. They argue that whilst Jesus College is rightfully re-examining the historical legacy of its most famous benefactor, at the same time it is ignoring concerns about its contemporary transactional relationship with the Chinese state, currently its greatest benefactor, one with a poor track record with human rights.

Sonita Alleyne claimed that, since she became Master, Jesus College received no donations from China. This however is inaccurate. In the years 2019-2021, Jesus College received nearly £450,000 worth of donations from the Chinese state. Below is a table that confirms that the University of Cambridge has received significant donations from China.

Financial Year	Individual	Organisation	Hong Kong	Grand Total
FY2017-18	£14,356	£2,588,417	£10,518,008	£13,120,781
FY2018-19	£16,364	£15,912,904	£9,226,411	£25,155,679
FY2019-20	£22,652	£5,307,348	£2,112,903	£7,442,903
FY2020-21	£1,749	£3,080,463	£854,700	£3,936,912
FY2021-22	£2,025	£2,612,786	£297,491	£2,912,302
Grand Total	£57,146	£29,501,918	£23,009,513	£52,568,577

Figure 4

Sir Tobias Rustat

Tobias Rustat (1608-1694), son of a vicar, joined the household of Viscount Feilding, a Leicestershire landowner, who was made ambassador to Venice in 1634. Rustat went on to join the royal household in the early 1640s and remained loyal to Prince Charles, who became Charles II. During the Civil Wars, Rustat carried secret correspondence between the King and Queen.



Figure 2



Figure 3

He joined Charles II in exile and became one of his favourite servants. His loyal service was rewarded with appointments as Yeoman of the Robes (1659) and Keeper of Hampton Court (1660). Rustat pursued other financial opportunities through his court connections. These included financial and other involvement in the Gambian Adventurers, the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa (RA) and the Royal African Company (RAC). In all three, he was an investor, lender and 'assistant (equivalent of director) and aware that these ventures traded enslaved people.

Rustat was one of Jesus College's most significant donors, establishing scholarships for sons of deceased clergy. He also contributed to the rebuilding of St. Paul's Cathedral and Chelsea Hospital. Rustat's contributions to Cambridge University total more than £500,000 in today's money. However, his benefaction to Jesus College could not have come from his investment in slave-trading companies as he made a loss on the RA which dissolved before his donation was made.

The Rustat memorial in Jesus College Chapel

Tobias Rustat commissioned the memorial from the studio of Grinling Gibbons in 1686. Rustat (with the exception of the final lines), chose the inscription words himself; it remained in his house until his death. The memorial was transferred to Jesus College after his death, where it hangs on the West Wall of its Chapel. The memorial itself is of white marble; it is surrounded by flower garlands and next to an engraving of Rustat are two cherubs. Below is the inscription of the memorial.

TOBIAS RUSTAT YEOMAN OF THE ROBES
TO KING CHARLES THE SECOND,
WHOM HE SERVED WITH ALL DUTY AND FAITHFULLNESS,
IN HIS ADVERSITY, AS WELL AS PROSPERITY;
THE GREATEST PART OF THE ESTATE HE GATHERED,
BY GODS BLESSING, THE KINGS FAVOUR, AND HIS INDUSTRY
HE DISPOSED IN HIS LIFE TIME IN WORKES OF CHARITY,
AND FOUND THE MORE HE BESTOWED
UPON CHURCHES, HOSPITALLS, UNIVERSITIES, AND COLLEGES,
AND UPON POOR WIDOWS & ORPHANS OF ORTHODOX MINISTERS,
THE MORE HE HAD AT THE YEARS END;
NEITHER WAS HE UNMINDFUL OF HIS KINDRED & RELATIONS
IN MAKEING THEM PROVISIONS OUT OF WHAT REMAINED,
HE DIED A BACHELOUR,
THE 15TH DAY OF MARCH
IN THE YEARE OF OUR LORD 1693.
AGED 87 YEARS.

Figure 1: Image: 'Statue of Robert Milligan outside the Museum of London Docklands, 9 June 2020'. Taken by Chis McKenna, reused under Creative Commons license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>

Figure 2: The memorial dedicated to Tobias Rustat located on the West wall of Jesus College Chapel. Picture: Keith Heppell

Figure 3: Tobias Rustat. Stipple engraving by W. N. Gardiner, 1796, after S. Harding after Sir P. Lely. Wellcome Collection, <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/>

Figure 4: Total University philanthropic income from China by financial year (including Huawei). University of Cambridge. <https://www.cam.ac.uk/a-global-university/china/our-funding-partnerships-with-china>

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