

# BRISTOL HISTORY

THE FIRST HISTORY OF BRISTOL IS GENERALLY CONSIDERED TO BE WILLIAM BARRETT'S 700-PAGE 'HISTORY AND ANTIQUITIES OF BRISTOL' (1789), THE RESULT OF 30 YEARS OF RESEARCH. UNFORTUNATELY, BARRETT WAS AMONG THOSE DUPED BY THOMAS CHATTERTON'S FAKED ANTIQUARIAN MATERIAL SO THE BOOK UNWITTINGLY CONTAINED MANY ERRORS.

Asked about the historical sources used in writing *The Bristol Story*, Eugene Byrne said:

*Most of the general histories do tend to stick to a rather standard-issue narrative and for that reason I'd say the best is still Derek Robinson's Shocking History of Bristol more recently reissued as A Darker History of Bristol because although it doesn't cover the whole story, it's a passionate attempt to break out of civic complacency and it's been in the shops for over 30 years. Bristol: a people's history by Peter Aughton is also still in the shops and is a very good (and nicely illustrated) general history. There are also loads of wonderful volumes from Redcliffe Press on various specific aspects of Bristol's story, which we've used a lot.*

*One of the most surprising aspects of the research has been the way in which the academics are producing a lot of superb and specialised work which doesn't always make it into print beyond journals and papers. I have a strong feeling that it's time that someone now produced a big general history that takes maximum advantage of all that new research, some of which turns a lot of received ideas upside down.*

Among the new research, is the claim that rather than being lost at sea, as suggested by the chronicler Polydore Vergil in the early sixteenth century, the explorer John Cabot returned safely to England in 1500 after completing an extensive exploration of the North American coast. This discovery is attributed to Dr Alwyn Ruddock, the world-expert on Cabot, who died in December 2005. Ruddock gave instructions in her will that her research material, accumulated over 40 years, should be destroyed after her death. However, Dr Evan Jones of the University of Bristol has uncovered that Ruddock claimed to have found evidence not only of Cabot's return but also details of the voyage down the coast including the establishment of a religious colony in Newfoundland. This challenges over 500 years of accepted knowledge about Cabot's fate.

Eugene continued:

*There's a lot of little things which I have a strong feeling that when you put them together would actually seriously challenge the very standardised narrative we've had down the years. For instance, the way in which at certain points*



during the Middle Ages the town was virtually being run by Welshmen. Or the revelation that Bristol merchants were still trading with Spain at the time of the Armada. The thing that fascinates me most is the period during the seventeenth century when Barbary pirates from North Africa regularly took ships in the Bristol Channel (they were based on Lundy island for a while) and even raided the coast to kidnap people and take them into slavery. This last is not the fruit of any particularly new research, just something that's been completely forgotten until recently. The other really exciting development this year is Peter Fleming and Madge Dresser's Bristol: Ethnic Minorities and the City, 1000-2001; there are probably lots of interesting finds in that.

One of the roles of historians is to provide the facts that debunk long-established myths which people have assumed to be history – though the myths themselves continue to be of value for what they say about perceptions and viewpoints. There are a number of myths that have developed around Bristol's slave trade, for example. Many people believe that Blackboy Hill took its name from the slaves who were paraded there *en route* to the city's slave market. In fact, very few enslaved people actually came to Bristol as they would have been taken directly from Africa to the Caribbean plantations in a triangular trade. Similarly some believe the *ss Great Britain*, Brunel's transatlantic passenger carrier, was used for carrying slaves, even though it was launched 30 years after the British slave trade was abolished. Such myths develop partly to fill a gap in knowledge: until recently little was made public about Bristol's involvement in slavery and there continues to be a need for more information and understanding about what took place.

History – and what is considered significant about the past – also changes over time. One example is the change in



people's fame and reputation. In the foyer of Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery there hangs a large-scale oil painting by Ernest Board entitled *Some Who Have Made Bristol Famous*. It was presented to the gallery in 1930 as an anonymous gift. In the painting, a fictional gathering of 39 figures whose lives span nearly 800 years of history stands in front of Temple Gate while Bristol aeroplanes fly overhead. The gathering includes explorers, mariners, philanthropists, social reformers, slave traders, abolitionists, manufacturers, artists, historians and statesmen. Besides the members of the Wills family included here, who may well have commissioned and donated the painting, the people were chosen by the artist as recognisable personalities who were symbols of civic pride. Many are now forgotten and today, with hindsight, there are others who would be more deserving of inclusion in the group. We may also now question whether focusing on famous individuals is the best way to learn about our history.



Opposite: Artist's impression of John Cabot's departure taken from the 1945 book *English City: the growth and the future of Bristol* published by J S Fry and Sons Ltd.

Top: *The Death of Colston* by Richard Jeffreys Lewis (c1844) (Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives). Merchant Edward Colston (1636-1721) briefly served as Bristol's MP and endowed a number of local institutions and charitable societies. This imaginary death-bed scene, painted over 100 years after his death, features a grieving black woman, making it uncomfortable viewing today because of Colston's association with the slave trade.

Left: Ernest Board's *Some Who Have Made Bristol Famous* (1930) (Bristol's Museums, Galleries and Archives).