Of Men and Monuments

In the late nineteenth century, which saw the ‘scramble’ of imperial powers to consolidate and extend overseas empires, belief in the ‘great man in history’ was the rule. Even if some historians argued that impersonal forces, such as economic trends, explained historical developments, there was widespread conviction that individuals – explorers, politicians, entrepreneurs – made history. Therefore, it seemed appropriate to pay tribute to great men – seldom were great women, except queens, candidates for such heroic treatment – in statues and other memorials. Representations of the great and good aimed to remind the public of the men and their deeds, to embody the gratitude of the nation and to encourage the patriotic fervour, pioneering cultural or scientific achievements, or selfless commitment exemplified by the figures. What Maurice Agulhon has called ‘statuomania’ particularly marked the Third Republic, which was also the high age of imperialism.

Men were commemorated in a number of concrete and public ways. The simplest perhaps was a graveyard monument. All tombstones are memorials to those who lie beneath them, even if inscriptions record only names and the dates of birth and death. More detailed inscriptions, urns, statues and funerary chapels ornament the graves of grander (or wealthier) men and women. Those considered particularly worthy are buried with great pomp in national cemeteries or shrines (such as the Panthéon in Paris). The naming of streets after dead figures (and, more rarely, living ones) is a second and common way of commemorating someone’s life and work. Many streets simply record a geographical direction or feature, a property-owner or a traditional name whose origins are lost in the past, while others bear the names of places, ideas or institutions – ‘liberty’, ‘nation’, ‘republic’. Still others memorialise a figure of local or national merit. A further, and again simple, way of recalling the great dead is through a plaque affixed to the house where they were born, lived or died. In some cases, the house itself becomes a museum, often when the building is left to the state or commune. Museums and similar institutions commemorate the famous through exhibits, characteristically with carefully preserved artefacts and explanations of their
accomplishments. Finally public authorities and private donors erect statues or memorials, usually life-like in form, often decorated with words and motifs recording the great man’s works, and sometimes placed at a venue associated with his actions.

Colonial figures are commemorated in all of these ways. The monumental landscape provides an indication of which figures captured public attention and gained official consecration, as well as which aspects of the colonial enterprise most successfully marked themselves in the national patrimony. This chapter will look at the different fashions in which colonial figures appear in public commemoration, from modest plaques and gravestones to elaborate monuments and statues. Although an exhaustive inventory, if possible, would be fastidious, the examples chosen illustrate the figures commemorated and the way in which they are remembered. Besides providing an overview of great colonial figures in French monuments, concentrating on Paris, it will focus on several selected cases: colonials in the Panthéon, the martyrology of missionaries and saints, and the ‘monumentalisation’ of several colonials in museums.

Colonial statues in Paris

Statues and monuments dedicated to figures whose achievements occurred entirely in the colonies are less obvious than those devoted to statesmen of more general national import. This scarcity suggests that, despite the propaganda of colonial lobbyists, the empire never engaged the wholehearted attention or enthusiasm of the French in the way in which promoters hoped. Moreover, many statues of famous Frenchmen who were involved in the colonies make no reference to their colonial endeavours when they were overshadowed by other accomplishments. Paris’s statues make the point. For instance, the statue of Jules Ferry in the Tuileries Gardens does not hint at his colonial interests – perhaps not surprisingly since ‘Ferry le Tonkinois’ was forced to resign as prime minister because of opposition to his expansion in Indochina, though he was later lauded as a founder of France’s new empire. The statue and others of Ferry pay homage to his establishment of a system of obligatory, free and lay education. Similarly, a recent statue of Charles de Gaulle, striding down the Champs-Elysées, commemorates the Liberation at the end of the Second World War with no reference to de Gaulle’s role in the decolonisation of Algeria and black Africa. The statue of Louis Pasteur in the Avenue de Breteuil honours the scientist and epidemiologist without a reminder of the role of the Pasteur Institutes around the world. One of Admiral Coligny, in front of a Protestant church in the Rue de Rivoli, recalls his death in the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre rather than his attempts to establish settlements in the New World. Neither of the two abstract statues commemorating Arthur Rimbaud (Place du Père-Teilhard-de-Chardin) and Albert Camus (Place du Colonel-Fabien) point to their colonial connections,